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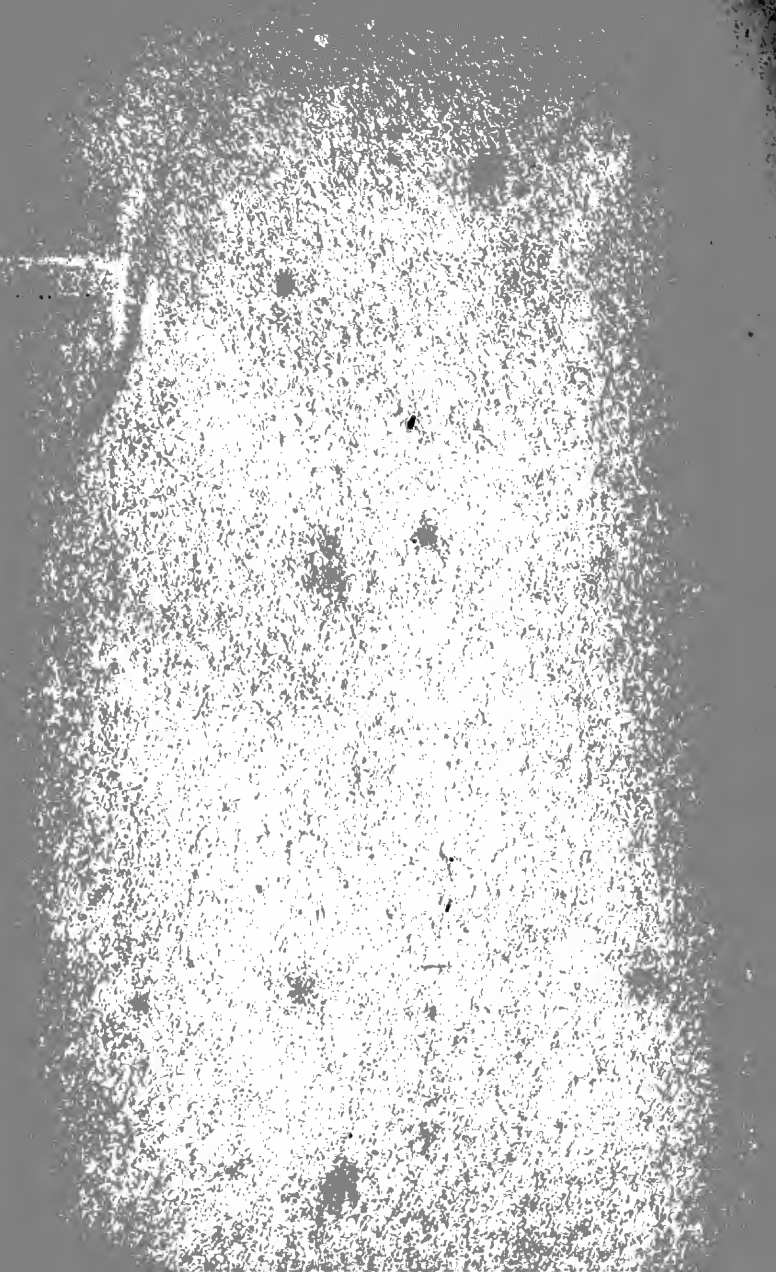
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7. 10. 1941

CAVANAGH OF KULTĀNN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

WYNNEGATE SAHIB
WINGS OF THE MORNING

LONDON: HODDER & STOUGHTON

CAVANAGH OF KULTĀNN

BY
JOAN SUTHERLAND

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

TO
THE REAL "CAVANAGH"

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Annex

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CHAPTER I

It was the middle of an August afternoon, and outside the District Officer's bungalow no sign of life was visible save a sleepy Hindu nodding over a rifle he was cleaning and a fox-terrier lying asleep on the verandah. It was drawing near the end of the hot weather, and the sun blazed down from a brazen sky on the narrow stretch of tilled land along the banks of the Kultānar, with its maize and wheat standing ready for the harvest, and on the wide dreary plain lying to the south, bare of cultivation, and left untouched by the river as it wound its way eastward to join the Indus, hundreds of miles distant.

Behind the bungalow, the foothills began to rise less than a mile away, steep grey slopes clothed here and there by pine-woods reaching farther and farther northward and upward, till they merged into the vast towering rampart of the Safed Koh. On the south stretched a wide dreary valley, bare and full of débris from the enfolding mountains and swept by cruel winds from the snow-wrapped giants of the Border.

But to-day the winds were still, for the valley was near the harvest, and the little villages clustered around the life-giving river were at peace as they waited for the reaping of the grain.

Kultānn, one of the extreme western outposts of British occupation, consisted of the District Officer's bungalow, a mud-walled club-house, a school, a court-house, a white-washed building (lying just beyond the ford), which was the hospital, and a square half-mile or so of bazaar, and those buildings and a very unpretentious-looking fort, made up the town of Kultānn.

Inside the bungalow this hot afternoon the District Officer sat, up to his eyes in work, surrounded by letters, papers, official documents, and native appeals; for the Commissioner was due on the morrow, and there was much to be done before his arrival. So Richard Cavanagh went steadily through document after document, writing, noting, calculating, and occasionally tossing a paper across to his subordinate, Robert

Cameron Kinloch, otherwise known as Bobby, a slender, fair-haired boy who adored his chief and worked like a horse. The room where the two men sat was very close, and both were working in shirt-sleeves, Richard Cavanagh pausing every now and then to wipe the perspiration from his forehead as he toiled through the papers before him. By working till dawn they might hope to have things ready, but as they had been at the task in hand for nearly a week, the prospect was not pleasant. Presently the silence was broken by Kinloch's voice.

"Here is Abdul Gharfur, sir."

Cavanagh raised his head, his brows contracting; a fat Mohammedan was making his way across the compound followed by a wailing small boy.

"What the deuce is he after?" Cavanagh exclaimed. "Tell Ramshar Khan to head him off, Bobby," and so plunged back into the brain-bewildering document in front of him, which represented a fortnight's hard labour on the part of a native accountant or zaildar, and set forth at length how Mahli Ali, a farmer four miles away, had quarrelled with his son-in-law and sent forth falsified accounts of his spring harvest, thereby cheating the Revenue Assistant—personified by the sunburnt boy across the room. What the quarrel with the son-in-law had to do with the accounts was the problem Cavanagh was trying to solve, and it appeared to be involved. Therefore, when sounds of strife arose outside the door, he was not best pleased, and Bobby Kinloch, seeing the impatient jerk of the head, pushed aside his own papers and hurried out to see what was the matter.

Ramshar Khan, the khitmutgar, stood on the verandah, interposing his magnificent six-foot-two of stature between the door and the importunate visitors, and as Bobby Kinloch came forward he turned with a wave of his arm and spoke:

"Behold, ye have roused the Heaven-born with your pratings! Now what will ye? Kinloch Sahib, I have talked and talked, but this Sunni munshi will not cease his bukh! What can I do, Sahib? It is not meet for him to disturb His Excellency with his vain noise, and in truth he would not speak so if I had my will."

Kinloch glanced from one to the other.

"What is the trouble?" he said. "What does he want, Ramshar Khan?"

"But to make the earth more weary of his presence than it

is already ! He saith, Sahib, that his son yonder"—Ramshar Khan flashed a wrathful glance at the small boy—"hath been ordered by the Doctor Sahib to bear the scratch with the knife upon his arm. But the son he wishes it not—*my* sons have no wishes ; they have only obedience—and nothing will satisfy this munshi but that the child shall hear the order from the Heaven-born himself. Till then he saith he will not endure the knife."

The Mohammedan began to explain volubly, but Kinloch cut him short.

"The Heaven-born has sent word for the knife. It is an order," he said. "You've got to have it done," he added, relapsing into nervous English. "Do as you're told. It can't hurt you."

"If His Excellency Cavanagh Sahib would but see me," the father put in. "It is but a few words from his mouth, and the child——"

"Thou and the child !" Ramshar Khan interrupted indignantly. "Get hence and teach the child obedience ! Here we be men, and busy."

At this juncture the small cause of the argument broke into a lusty roar, which brought Richard Cavanagh on to the verandah, frowning and angry.

"Have ye not heard my orders ?" he said. "What do you mean by this nonsense ? The child is to bear the knife to-night, or I will give directions that you are to be detained and fined. Now go !"

Abdul Gharfur retired with many salaams, and with a word to the Pathan, Cavanagh re-entered his office.

"What trick brought him here, I wonder ?" he said as he sat down once more to his table, and Kinloch stared.

"He told you," he said. "What else ?"

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you seriously think, Bobby, that Abdul Gharfur hasn't sufficient authority over his son to have him vaccinated ten times over if he wants to ?" he said. "You're a good boy, my son, but sometimes you lack brains."

Kinloch's bewildered face showed he did not understand, and Richard laughed.

"Sometime, when we haven't more than twenty men's work to do, I'll explain further. Abdul Gharfur wanted to find out if I were here or not. Now, for Heaven's sake let's get this business finished ! Oh, these men ! Why the

blistering Hades don't they talk straight instead of beginning in the middle and finishing before the end ! Here, I've got these accounts done. There seems to be a deficit of about one hundred and fifty rupees. Check 'em over while I look through the report Chan Ali has sent in on the irrigation."

He stopped hurriedly to fill and light a pipe, and there followed a long silence, broken only by the scratching of pens and the rustle of papers. Presently there was a knock at the door, and Ramshar Khan appeared.

"Heaven-born, the Doctor Sahib desires you. Shall I admit him ?"

Cavanagh looked up, hot and weary.

"Yes, show him in, and bring us some tea."

"I will fulfil my lord's orders," the man said submissively, and retreated, closing the door noiselessly so that he should in no way disturb the master he adored.

A second later the visitor entered, a short, square-faced, keen-eyed Scotsman, who glanced from the sea of papers to the two men.

"Hullo !" he said. "What the deuce are you two at ? Doing some work for a change, Bobby ? Cavanagh, I've news for you."

Bobby Kinloch flashed a smile at the speaker and bent again over his desk ; Ronald Scott, Medical Officer for the District, was a great friend of his. At his words Cavanagh threw down his pen and leant back.

"Hullo, old chap ! Sit down. Glad to see you. What news ? Good or bad ?"

"Bad, of course. What else do you expect in this God-forsaken country ? There's an outbreak of small-pox at Jallundar, and I've spent the last two days roundin' up the villages to quarantine 'em. Seems pretty bad, and there's a lot of trouble over the vaccination . . . some blasted fool of a mullah been telling 'em it's a device of the devil. Wish I'd got him here. I'd devil him !"

He tossed his cigarette-end away, and touched a mass of papers with his foot.

"What's the particular business ?" he said.

"Holland comes to-morrow," Cavanagh said with a yawn that showed a splendid set of teeth. Holland was the Commissioner. "There are those to go through," and he nodded towards a table piled with documents. "And to-night at seven I hold a court to settle those cases from Peranan."

"Who is your naib-tākim?" Scott asked. "The old chap died, didn't he?"

"Yes. Ram Ullah has it. Good man."

"Who is coming? Anyone except the usual run?"

"No. There's not much to-night. A couple of maliks have been squabbling over the boundaries of their villages. That's the chief thing. Ah, here's tea. Put it here, Ramshar Khan, and give orders to feed the Doctor Sahib's horse."

The khitmutgar salaamed and departed, and Cavanagh pushed his chair back and signed to Kinloch, who had been making his way through the last batch of accounts, to leave off casting longing glances at the blatant little alarm-clock in front of him and to have some tea.

"Come and have some tea, Bobby," he said. "Half an hour and we will go on. You can get on with the Irrigation Report and the Treasury Returns from Jallundar. Scott, I've got my leave. Starting in the spring."

"Lucky beggar!" was Scott's comment as he sipped scalding tea, an excellent thing to ward off heat apoplexy when the veins of the neck are inclined to swell inopportunately on hot nights. "You'll go straight through to town, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course. Fancy seeing Piccadilly Circus again, and hearing the newsboys shouting and the traffic over the stones! What is it, Bobby?"

"You must meet my sister, Violet Leighton. She married Norman Leighton, the member for Ledbury, you know, a year or two ago," Bobby said eagerly. "He's a Radical, which is pretty rotten, but I believe he is rather clever. I'll give you an introduction if I may, sir. She's charming. Perhaps you know Leighton, though I don't think he is quite the sort of man you care about?"

"I've never met him," Cavanagh replied. "But I have an idea I've met your sister, several years ago—last time I was home. It was my first leave, and she was just out. Thanks, old chap, I should like to meet her again. I'm sorry to have to leave you behind. You've worked well."

"Oh, I've not been out long enough yet," Kinloch answered, flushing with pleasure at the praise. "You've not been home for ten years, have you?"

"Yes. Five. I was only actually in London for a week or two, because my brother was ill, and I went abroad with him, but I went home for a little. More tea, Scott? Cigarette? By Jove, it's six o'clock! I must be off!"

He stood up as he spoke, hastily swallowed the last of his tea, put on his coat, with a groan at the heat, and tossed a final direction at Bobby Kinloch.

"Have those irrigation papers finished for me before I come back," he said. "Staying the night, Scott? You may as well."

Scott accepted the invitation, and when Cavanagh had gone Kinloch went back to his desk with the flush still on his sunburnt face.

"Talk of work; he works like a horse!" he said. "Got all those cases to hear to-night, draw up a full report, oversee the Revenue Returns here"—he tapped some papers lying to one side—"and get through the rest of this before Holland comes to-morrow. There's enough work for a dozen men, but the Government we are rejoicing under at present doesn't think the Border of enough consequence to staff it properly."

"Wait till you've been through some of my work before you talk about understaffing," Scott retorted. "Not been through a famine and a cholera outbreak afterwards, have you? Well, wait. Then you'll see what understaffing really is. Cavanagh and I have had several pleasant little affairs like that. But you are right about him. He's the hardest worker I ever met—and the toughest. Well, I must be off. I'm going to ride to Peranan and see if things are all right there. If they are I shall be back to-night. If not, I shan't. Good luck to the accounts."

He nodded a farewell, and departed to ride eleven miles to the next village to inspect its inhabitants before the small-pox should arrive, while Bobby wrestled with the accounts, revenue returns, assessment of land values, declaration of water-rights, boundaries, and suchlike, which help to make up the work of a District Officer and his Assistant in the North-West Provinces.

It was about eleven when Richard Cavanagh re-entered the compound, walking quickly back to the work that awaited him. The moon had risen, and lay above the tops of the low hills like a great golden ball, lighting half the compound with brilliant radiance, leaving the other half in darkest shadow. He paused to light a pipe as he reached the boundary-line, and the light from the match held above the bowl in the still hot air threw his face into violent relief against the blackness of the surroundings. The pipe lit easily; he moved to throw the burning match away, and felt the whizz

of a bullet past his ear as a report rang out from the darkness beyond the bungalow.

Richard Cavanagh dropped the match and wheeled round, springing at the same moment back into the shadow, and almost simultaneously with the sound of the shot the bungalow door was flung open and Ramshar Khan, followed by Bobby Kinloch, rushed out, and in a moment the compound was alive with servants, grooms, women, and even children.

The man threw himself in front of his master and hustled him into the crowd of servants, even as Kinloch issued a sharp order, and the men turned out to begin the search for the would-be murderer.

"Sahib, my Sahib, you are not hurt?" Ramshar Khan cried. "Nay, do not go after him now. Thy servant shall go. I will go, in charge of those yonder. Come within, Sahib, Heaven-born, do not stay here! . . . Kinloch Sahib, I beseech you to guard my Sahib while I go to wreak my vengeance on the son of a pig yonder who has dared to try and kill my Sahib! That any should dare!"

Scott came riding in from Peranan in the midst of the confusion, and found the whole place in an uproar, and when Kinloch had despatched the men and the compound was beginning to simmer down again like a disturbed hive, Scott and Cavanagh faced one another in the latter's study.

Richard took the fateful pipe from his pocket and relit it, then sat for a minute or two in silence, smoking steadily and gazing straight in front of him with set lips and two little upright lines between his brows. Presently he took the pipe from his lips and spoke.

"Clumsy bit of work that."

Scott looked at him curiously.

"Clumsy—why?"

"Why, because anyone but a fool or a bungler would have dropped me as easily as see me."

"Do you know who it was?"

"I've a shrewd idea, and I don't think they will catch him to-night."

"You took it pretty calmly, anyway," Scott said, with a laugh. "You've nerves of steel, man."

Richard lifted his eyebrows.

"I've no use for anything else," he retorted. "And, after all, there was no time to be scared. Pass the matches, will you?"

Scott did as he was requested, and for a minute or two the two men smoked in silence ; then, with a little impatient jerk of his shoulders, Richard got up.

" Well, I must get to work again. Nuisance Kinloch going off like that. He knew I should want him."

He went across the room and stood for a moment looking out, his figure showing clearly against the light to anyone without, whereupon Scott sprang up, and, with a sharp exclamation, dragged him back.

" Don't be a fool, Cavanagh ! What the devil are you thinking of ? "

Richard turned round in surprise, then laughed.

" My dear chap, Kinloch and the others between them have cleared the country by this time for miles round," he said.

" Don't worry your head about that. Now you can amuse yourself, for I'm going to start."

At three o'clock in the morning Kinloch and the others returned from a futile search to find Scott asleep in a chair and Richard still at the writing-table, working unceasingly.

Kinloch grinned as he looked at the Medical Officer, then he went to his chief's side.

" Not a sign of him," he said. " But the Ressaldar got wind of the affair and took a patrol out, and he hasn't come back yet. You ought to be in bed, sir ; you're looking awfully fagged. I'll finish my irrigation report and then I'll turn in."

Richard got up and stretched.

" Go to bed yourself, Bobby. Yes, I'll turn in pretty soon. I've finished your report. So you saw no sign of him ? I'm not surprised. Never mind, I don't suppose he'll get a second chance to finish me off. Good-night, old chap. Scott, wake up ! "

With Kinloch's aid, Scott was pummelled into wakefulness and dragged, protesting, to bed, while Cavanagh finished his report, and then sat for a time staring at nothing in particular as he searched his memory to find an explanation of the shot. Abdul Gharfur was unsatisfactory ; he was known to be a miser, and he had a habit of being away from his village for months at a time on business that could never be ascertained. He—Cavanagh—did not trust him in the least, and did not rest altogether contented to know nothing of the reason causing those prolonged absences. Twice the accounts had been falsified, and the second time, the trick having been

discovered, Abdul Gharfur had been severely dealt with. That he should have turned up during the day on such an absurd errand, annoyed Cavanagh. He lived at least fifteen miles away, and the journey had been undertaken during the hottest part of the day, with no shade save by the Ramdur well. Cavanagh's thoughts paused for a moment. The well in question was half a mile outside Kultānn, and used by the native population to a great extent. Could the fat Mohammedan have worked his revenge by tampering with the water? The question was worth considering. Poisoned water meant cholera, and cholera meant endless work and death abroad in the land, and Abdul Gharfur was quite subtle enough to realize that while his personal safety meant little to Richard Cavanagh, the safety of Kultānn was a very different matter.

Cavanagh frowned and swore vengeance under his breath if his suspicion should prove to be well founded, and then, having settled the matter in so far as he was powerless to act at the moment, he let his thoughts drift idly.

The mail had come in that afternoon, and among his letters was one from a great friend, Gifford Chetwynde, who was making a brilliant name for himself among the foremost surgeons of the day. Cavanagh leaned back, and, stretching out a lazy arm, took the letter in question from the writing table and looked over it a second time.

"So glad you are coming home in the spring," the letter ran. "And don't forget that you have promised to spend part of the time with me, and I shan't let you off. I want you to meet my sister Evelyn, and she is longing to hear news first-hand of her beloved frontier. Hurry up, old chap, and come back."

Richard chuckled.

"People seem very anxious for me to meet their sisters," he said half aloud. "I wonder——" He broke off for a minute as he refilled and lit his pipe. General Chetwynde, his friend's father, had held command here at Kultānn for fifteen years, and his name was one to conjure with amongst the fierce Border tribes. He had been dead six years before Richard's arrival at Kultānn, but his name lived on, and his work spoke eloquently for him—so eloquently that Colonel Robert Henderson, his successor, grumbled that his men often made him feel he was but a usurper.

Richard had never met him, although he and Gifford had gone through school together and spent all their spare time

in each other's company, till Gifford went to Germany for a year after taking his F.R.C.S., and Richard to India. Their friendship included one other person, a certain baronet, Sir George Duncombe, the eldest of the three, who, when the other two went their various ways, married a very charming wife and settled down comfortably to manage his big estates.

It was an odd trio, and Sir George was the surprising element in it, for he was a frank Sybarite, fond of gaiety and the good things of this life, as well as being a married man, and marriage has a way of being fatal to such friendships as these. However, in this case it had not been so, and Sir George retained his place, for Cecile, his wife, held strong ideas about friendship in her pretty head, and would as soon thought of jumping off Westminster Bridge as of separating her husband from these two men.

Cavanagh's idly ranging thoughts paused a moment on Lady Duncombe, then wandered again, and finally fixed themselves on this other woman, Evelyn Chetwynde. He had often heard of her, but they had not met, and he rather wished to repair the omission, for since she was Gifford's sister and General Chetwynde's daughter, she must be worth knowing.

So far he was singularly unattracted by women, and his knowledge of them was scanty, for, with the exception of one short leave, he had spent all his time since his coming of age on the frontier of India in a place where life was hard and work heavy, and in so doing he had put all his amazing energy and splendid vitality into his work and his District. Now, at the age of thirty-five, he had a record many an older man might envy, and had put the stamp of his authority on his people in a way to be wondered at. All his life Richard Cavanagh had been possessed of great personal charm, and it had been astoundingly in evidence since he had been in a position of authority. His subordinates worked for him as they would work for no one else. Bobby Kinloch adored him, and his servants worshipped his very shadow. His chief conquest in the direction of personal devotion was the senior native officer of the —th Sikh Cavalry, Rissaldar Ramadur Singh, Companion of the Star of British India, Commander of the Indian Empire, and Prince in his own right, the proudest old nobleman and one of the most distinguished soldiers in the whole of Northern India.

His acquaintance with Richard Cavanagh had commenced

ordinarily enough, but had speedily ripened into a very rare and close friendship, based upon mutual respect and liking—one of those friendships that now and then occur between the young and the old—for the Prince was nearly sixty-six, and loved Cavanagh as a son.

All this—his popularity with his own sex, his position of authority and his own intense love for his work—had combined to make Richard the man he was : steady, resourceful, cool-headed, and iron-willed; a man of immense energy, superb physical health, and absolute self-reliance, already looked upon as one of the coming men in the Indian Political Service.

Such was Richard Cavanagh, District Officer of Kultänn, and to-night, as he went to bed, he found himself thinking of old times and old scenes more vividly than usual, and, as well, the two women he was going to meet when he went home became interesting personalities for the sake of their masculine relatives who were his friends:

Once, and once only, he had met for a few minutes a girl whose face still lived in his memory, and whose charm had compelled him to desire personal friendship with her. It had been a State Ball at Buckingham Palace, and he had not caught her name. She was a maid-of-honour, and her loveliness and charm had delighted him. He had wondered more than once if he should ever see her again. Then, realizing his thoughts were for him very unusual, he laughed to himself, and, turning over in the hot darkness, went to sleep, for it was nearly four o'clock in the morning, and he had a long and heavy day's work in front of him.

CHAPTER II

MARCH was nearly at an end when Richard Cavanagh landed in England, a March of exceptional charm, bright and sunny, with roaring winds and clear, rain-washed skies, and as he drove to his brother's house in Berkeley Square he felt as excited as a schoolboy.

Her ladyship would be with him in a moment, the footman informed him, and withdrew, leaving Richard alone in the sunny drawing-room. He strolled over to a big mirror,

glanced at his reflection and straightened his coat, gazed with keen pleasure at the great bowls of daffodils and narcissus standing about the room, then took up a photograph standing on a little table, and, scrutinizing it closely, recognized his little niece, grown almost out of knowledge.

The change made him keenly aware of the time he had been away, and he proceeded to inspect the other portraits, amongst them one of his sister-in-law, Lady Hilda Cavanagh. She had not altered ; he saw that at once, and he smiled as he thought of her, hardly able to believe that he had grown to be of sufficient importance in her eyes to warrant what he knew to be true—namely, that she had hastened her departure from the country by two days on purpose to welcome him home.

That Hilda should have allowed anything or anybody to change her plans was in itself unusual, but that the cause was his unworthy self was nothing short of marvellous, for between Lady Hilda and himself a latent antagonism had always existed. It had begun on the day when he had sent a box of old satin shoes, collected from various relatives, carefully expressed and registered, after her to Cairo, where she was spending her honeymoon, and although that was twenty years ago, she had disapproved of him ever since.

"Uncle Richard ! Oh, Uncle Richard !"

The clear young voice rang out in joyous welcome, and the speaker flung her arms round his neck.

"You're here at last !" she cried. "Oh, how jolly it is to see you again ! Speak ! Say you are glad to see me !"

He took her arms down, holding her hands in his, while a smile flashed into his eyes and parted his lips.

"My dear Betty, you didn't give me time to say anything," he objected. "But I'm delighted ! Of course I am ! So you haven't forgotten me all these years ?"

She pulled him down beside her on a low seat.

"Forgotten, of course not !" she laughed. "To hear you speak like that, anyone would think you had been away half a century ! Why, I was fourteen ; not so very small."

He put one hand under her chin and looked in her face.

"You make me feel horribly ancient," he said. "Eighteen ! Oh, Betty !"

She laughed.

"Yes, and I am to be presented at the next Court, and you've to see the King, haven't you ? Dear me, what an important family we are getting !"

"How is your mother?" Richard asked.

"Quite well. She'll be here in one moment. She was quite annoyed at not being the first one to welcome you."

Richard hid a smile at the idea with difficulty. Then, too loyal to let Betty see his amusement, changed the subject with a laugh.

"By Jove, Betty, this is awful! I'm getting greyer every moment with the shock of finding a grown-up niece! Ah! Here is your mother!"

Lady Hilda Cavanagh was nearly forty-five, but still extraordinarily young in appearance. She was undoubtedly a beautiful woman, but as Richard's eyes rested upon her he felt again the old boyish feeling of repression rising within him; she was always so calm and so cold, so courteous and fair and just, yet always lacking the one thing needful to make her wholly lovely—warm living human sympathy.

It all flashed through his brain as she advanced to meet him, and he knew she had not altered one whit with the years.

"My dear Richard, I am most pleased to see you!" she said as they shook hands. "I hope Betty has explained my absence to you? It was unavoidable."

"So I understood," he answered. "Betty has played hostess very charmingly, and, indeed, it was most kind of you to be here at all. The unexpectedness of my arrival must have been horribly inconvenient."

"It necessitated some haste," she replied, smiling, "but the arrival itself was too welcome for the inconvenience to be of any consequence."

The reply was characteristic, and Richard knew it was absolutely sincere, yet the words gave him, as they always did, the impression of having been carefully rehearsed and arranged, although he knew perfectly well that it was not so.

"What are your plans for to-night?" she went on, after the usual greetings and questionings were over. "We shall be charmed to take you with us to Lady Nottingham's, but perhaps you have already made your arrangements?"

Richard glanced at Betty.

"I had thought of taking Betty to a theatre, as she tells me she is not going with you—that is if I may."

Hilda looked at her daughter.

"That is very kind of you," she said. "And I am sure that Betty is delighted at the idea and will enjoy herself immensely. How well you are looking, Richard! India

evidently agrees with you. You have six months' leave, I suppose?"

"Yes. Oh, I'm quite fit, thanks. I always am, you know. How is Frank? When will he be in? I'm longing to see him."

"I am expecting him every moment. Betty, will you lower that blind a little? The one close to you."

Richard jumped up.

"I'll do it," he said, and Lady Hilda thanked him and took a dead leaf from a vase filled with daffodils, crumpling it gently between her fingers and finally putting it in the fire. The action annoyed Richard exceedingly; it was so quietly done and so expressive of Hilda's well-ordered outlook on life.

"Then that's settled," he said, as he sat down again. "I expect I shall have a good deal to do after to-night, and I am going to stay with Duncombe at his place the week after next. Beyond that I haven't any plans."

"I am glad you are going to Yelverton. You will meet Evelyn Chetwynde, Dr. Chetwynde's sister."

Richard looked at her quickly.

"Do you know her, then?" he said. "I did not know that."

"I used to know her very well a few years ago," she replied. "But since her father's death I have only seen her once. There was not very much money, and she retired from society and went to live at Pangley, and keep house for her brother and bring up the younger children. I think her action very fine and extraordinarily unselfish, for her position was a most brilliant one. She was one of the Queen's maids-of-honour, and an immense favourite with everyone. I shall be interested to hear if you admire her as much as I have always done."

Richard felt that it was not likely; Hilda's favourites were apt to be a trifle dull, but he did not say so, and at that moment the sound of a motor stopping outside proclaimed Frank Cavanagh's arrival, and proved a welcome interruption.

Betty withdrew to the window as her father entered, with outstretched hands and eager smile of welcome.

"Dick! My dear old chap, how are you?"

Richard took two swift strides towards him and wrung his hands.

"Fit as a fiddle!" he said. "And you? How are you? Are you stronger?"

The elder man laughed off the question.

"Never mind me. I want to hear all about your doings. Come down to my den for a smoke; we've plenty of time before dinner." Richard excused himself to his sister-in-law and turned at the door to Betty.

"What time ought we to start?" he asked. "Dinner first, you know."

"I leave at seven, I think," she answered. "Mind you are ready."

"Punctuality is one of my few virtues," he retorted. "Come on, Frank."

He thrust his arm through his brother's, and they went down together to the study where the elder man spent so much of his busy life, and there, sitting down on either side of the fire, began to talk.

Betty's entrance nearly two hours later interrupted the brothers' conversation, and sent Richard hurrying off to dress, and shortly afterwards he was on his way to the theatre, listening to Betty's eager chatter.

"What are your plans for the summer?" she asked. "Father said you would probably stay with us."

"I certainly shall be with you for part of the time," he answered. "But I've not really made my plans yet. Anyhow, I shall be quiet and sedate, for it's time . . . when I've a niece of your age!"

"Quiet! Sedate! You!" Betty cried derisively. "You couldn't be if you tried! To begin with, you are much too good-looking. Women won't let you be so very quiet, I know. And if you laugh like that I shall begin to flirt with you myself, and a man mayn't marry his niece! Oh, Uncle Richard, what a pity you are father's brother! If you weren't, I would fall in love with you. For you have a charming voice . . . it sends scriggles up and down one's back, and when you smile like that . . . yes . . . with your teeth gleaming, you are fascinatingly nice! Besides, you are too young for an uncle."

The car drew up at the restaurant as she ended, and Richard gave a shout of laughter.

"Betty, you are more of an *enfant terrible* than you were when I went away!" he exclaimed. "And that is saying a good deal. For Heaven's sake, don't mention my smile again, or I swear I'll wear a mask. Come and eat instead of making embarrassing remarks."

The restaurant was fairly empty at this hour, and there was no one in the room who attracted Richard's attention till he caught sight of two people at the farther side of the big room, evidently, like himself, bound theatrewards. The man was big and rather clumsily built, with a bull neck and heavy underhung jaw, and Richard felt a curious antipathy as he looked at him ; but it was on the woman, his companion, that he looked with most attention, for although not beautiful, she possessed an extraordinary personality, evident in every curve of her lithe form and in the wonderful eyes under their delicate brows. For a full minute Richard looked at her intently, then he turned to Betty.

"Do you know who that woman is ? " he asked.

Betty followed his gaze, and her young face hardened.

"That is Mrs. Norman Leighton," she answered. "Do you know her ? "

"No," he said. "But I probably soon shall, for she happens to be the sister of my Assistant, young Kinloch. Is that her husband ? "

"Yes. He's the member for Ledbury. Ah, they're going to the Opera, I suppose, as they are leaving so early."

Richard glanced across the room again, and saw them just rising, and watched them out of the room, unable to help noticing Mrs. Leighton's wonderful grace of movement, then turned to Betty and prepared to make himself agreeable.

For a couple of days after his arrival in town Richard Cavanagh was exceedingly busy with affairs relating to his work, and the end of the week arrived before he had any leisure to look up his friends. Sunday, however, found him disengaged, and about four o'clock he made his way to the Duncombes' house in South Audley Street, for he had ascertained that they had come up to town the day before.

Lady Duncombe was at home on Sundays, and to-day her charming drawing-room was pleasantly filled with her own particular and personal friends, and, as it chanced, Richard Cavanagh's name figured rather largely in the conversation, for he was more in the public eye than he realised, his command to Buckingham Palace having gained him a good deal of attention.

Therefore, when he was announced, there was a momentary lull in the hum of conversation, and people turned to look at him as he came in.

They saw a man slightly above middle height, broad-

shouldered and powerfully built, with an air of authority about him and a suggestion of immense latent strength in his easy carriage and free swinging walk; he had strongly-cut features, determined chin and jaw, and very steady grey eyes—the eyes of a man used to command. Above all things he was a man with a dominating personality, an iron will, and a very great personal charm, and this Lady Duncombe's guests recognized at once. Lady Duncombe herself was talking to her nearest neighbour by the little tea-table and pouring out tea when he was announced, and on hearing his name she left a cup half filled, broke off a conversation in the middle of a sentence, and crossed the room to meet him, hands outstretched and eyes radiant.

"Dick! Dick! It is the most delightful thing in the world to see you again. George will be here in a moment. He's longing to see you. Come and have some tea."

She introduced him to half a dozen people, and when he came to her side to get his cup of tea she paused a moment, looking up at him.

"Dine with us, Dick, won't you? Gifford will be here, and we shan't get a chance to talk to you now. That's right. Now go and make yourself charming to everybody."

She dismissed him with a nod and a smile, then, turning to her companion, took up the neglected thread of conversation. It was just after five when Richard heard the footman announce, "Mr. and Mrs. Norman Leighton," and looked up, to see the two people he had seen at the Savoy a few days before entering the room.

He scanned them both with more than his customary interest, attracted by Mrs. Leighton's unusual charm, which was accentuated by the close-fitting cloth dress she wore, its peculiar shade of green just matching the colour of her wonderful eyes. She crossed the room, greeted her hostess, and sank into a low chair, something of the sinuous grace of a cat in her movements; and Richard turned for a second look at her companion, wondering what kind of a man this woman had chosen for a husband.

Norman Leighton, well over middle-height, inclined to stoutness, and very heavily built, had a personality as distinct in its way as his wife's; but while her thin, rather sharp features were expressive of a temperament governed by spirit rather than matter, his heavy jaw, sensual lips, and thick neck spoke of exactly the reverse.

As Richard gazed at him he raised his head a little, and across the room their eyes met in a long steady look—the look of men who have taken an instinctive dislike to each other—and Richard, who was not given to apparently causeless aversions, was suddenly conscious of a dislike, so keen that it was almost hatred, for the man whose eyes met his.

Lady Duncombe's voice roused him.

"Come and be introduced to the Leightons, Dick," she said, touching his arm. "Mrs. Leighton will want to talk to you about her brother. Mrs. Leighton, may I introduce Mr. Richard Cavanagh? Dick, Mrs. Norman Leighton, Mr. Kinloch's sister. She is longing to hear all about him, I'm sure."

Mrs. Leighton raised her eyes to Richard's face, and a slow smile curved her lips.

"I am delighted to meet Bobby's chief," she said. "May I introduce my husband? Norman, this is Mr. Richard Cavanagh, my brother's taskmaster."

Leighton bowed, and as the two men looked at one another they each recognized the hostility in the other's glance. Leighton spoke first.

"You are the District Officer of Kultänn, where my brother-in-law works, I believe?"

The remark, with its absence of all courteous greeting, stirred Richard, and his voice was a shade more deliberate than usual as he answered:

"Yes," he said, "Kinloch is with me." Then he turned to Mrs. Leighton. "May I bring you some tea?" he added.

"Please. No milk; lemon. Do sit somewhere near, for I want to hear all about your work, and Bobby's. Is it hard?"

He smiled a little as he sat down on the lounge beside her.

"It's not exactly play, you know," he said, and Leighton's voice broke in:

"Indeed? I thought everyone had a very good time in India. Slightly more agreeable place than London, in fact."

"You've been hearing of Simla," Richard replied. "There's not much gaiety in our part of the country. It's a rough hand-to-mouth sort of existence, very like what life was on the Scottish Border a few centuries ago."

"Indeed? You surprise me. In what way are the places alike?"

"Clan feeling. The family feud business is very strong with us."

Mrs. Leighton's eyes narrowed a little ; she had heard the subtle change in his voice.

" You don't do the actual fighting, do you ? " she said. " You or Bobby ? "

Richard shook his head.

" No. That's not our work. The troops do the knocking about, you know."

Leighton glanced at his wife, then at Cavanagh.

" You merely ride about and give orders, I suppose," he remarked, and Richard flashed a quick look at him.

" Quite so ! " he said curtly, and at his answer Lady Duncombe put in an appealing question :

" Dick, do tell why they fight. What do they do ? "

" Raid," he said, smiling across at her—" guns or cattle or women."

Leighton spoke again, still watching Richard.

" I suppose such a post has its advantages ? "

" Certainly ; but equally its responsibilities. We are a very small body of Englishmen there, you know, and one has to keep one's end up."

Mrs. Leighton leant forward.

" Is that difficult ? " she asked.

He smiled.

" You can readily understand that it's not very easy, when I tell you a Pathan's chief prayer is that her son may grow up a really fine thief ! "

Lady Duncombe uttered a little cry of horror.

" Don't they regard stealing as a crime, then ? "

" No, but we are doing our best to impress that little fact on them both by precept and example. You see, they have got predatory instincts in them pretty strongly, and you can't knock out instincts that have lasted hundreds of years in a day."

" I suppose success with them depends somewhat on personality, doesn't it ? "

" To a certain extent, yes. If they like you they'll imitate you," Richard answered, and a rather ugly smile crept over Leighton's face.

" You seem to live very much in the public eye," he said. " Mint your coinage with your own image and superscription, I suppose."

Impossible as the words were, they were less offensive than

the tone, and for a second there was silence as the two men looked at one another. Then Richard spoke :

"No," he said deliberately. "British rupees—at present."

Lady Duncombe spoke with some haste.

"After all," she said, "it's only a difference of outlook. According to their standards, they behave quite well, I suppose. Isn't that so, Dick? As far as they know right, they live up to it!"

"Certainly. As for being in the public eye, it's impossible to be otherwise in a country where one's every thought is known, talked about, and criticized, almost before you know it yourself, and you can't play fast and loose with the Decalogue, or infringe by a hair's-breadth the moral code that you are trying to impress on an alien people."

"In short, you are a kind of lay missionary," Leighton said heavily. "Interesting occupation, I'm sure. And what is Robert's place in this grand scheme of moral regeneration?"

Richard's mouth hardened a little, but before he could reply Mrs. Leighton broke in, speaking rather fast.

"Yes—Bobby. Do tell me how Bobby is getting on!"

Richard turned to her quickly, a smile breaking over his face as his eyes met hers.

"Splendidly!" he said. "He works like a horse."

"When will he be home?"

"In about eighteen months. He sent you many messages, and I mustn't forget to deliver them. He worships the ground you walk on, you know."

She looked at him, her eyes narrowing a little.

"According to his letters he worships you," she said slowly. "Don't you get what you call 'fed up' with admiration?"

He laughed, rather shyly.

"Your brother's enthusiasm is delightful," he said. "You see, he's as keen as they make 'em, and there's nothing out at Kultänn to take him off his work—no social distractions or gaieties of any sort."

"Are you quite a bachelor lot out there, then?"

"Absolutely. It's no place for women."

Lady Duncombe looked at him in surprise.

"But, Dick, General Chetwynde was married," she said. "Gifford and Evelyn were born out there . . . at least Gifford was born at Peshawar, but they lived there, I know."

"Oh yes," he said. "I know Mrs. Chetwynde lived in camp for a while; but she was the wife of the military commander,

you see, and that makes a difference. Even then, I don't alter my opinion. It's not a fit place for women, too hard and lonely a life and too bad a climate. Bitterly cold all the winter, terribly hot all the summer. It's better for a man to be absolutely free, and then he can give his whole attention to his work."

Leighton cut short a desultory conversation with his neighbour and lifted his eyebrows.

"What an exemplary set of men you must be!" he said. "Really, I quite long to make the acquaintance of Kultänn!"

A tiny gleam of mischief danced for a moment in Richard's eyes. "Indeed?" he said. "You surprise me!"

Lady Duncombe turned rather hurriedly to bid a departing guest farewell, and Leighton's heavy face flushed a dull red, for even his perceptions could not fail to see the *double entendre* of Cavanagh's remark.

He changed the subject with deliberate malice, and spoke rather loudly.

"I'm afraid all this talk of India and the work there, is beyond my understanding. It seems to me that if a little of the work could be done in England, instead of being expended on a country that is merely ours by force of military aggression, it would be of more service to mankind."

The amusement died out of Richard's eyes and his whole face hardened.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Leighton," he said. "Do you mean that you consider India an unnecessary part of the British Empire?"

Leighton let his smouldering dislike be for a moment visible in his eyes.

"My meaning, Mr. Cavanagh, is that I believe in an England unfettered by outside responsibilities."

Richard uttered a short laugh.

"England unfettered as you suggest would very soon cease to be England altogether," he said. "But perhaps that would please you better. I am afraid my opinions do not coincide with yours."

Lady Duncombe glanced from Leighton's face to Richard's, the latter's rather paler than usual, with two upright lines between the brows and jaw grimly set. Just for a moment she feared his anger might break bounds, and she saw the hand that rested on his thigh clench till the knuckles stood out white and polished, then with a visible effort he mastered

himself, and smiled an odd little smile that she did not understand.

"Really, I did not intend to turn Lady Duncombe's drawing-room into a platform for political arguments," he said. "You must please pardon my forgetfulness of time and place."

Much relieved at his tact in thus definitely ending a subject that threatened to grow too unpleasant, she smiled across at him.

"Of course, Dick. And it was most interesting, but I wanted to introduce you to the Duchess of Winchester, and if you don't come now she will have gone. Will you forgive me for taking him away, Mrs. Leighton?"

"Certainly! Especially as we must also take ourselves away," Mrs. Leighton answered. "Norman has to go to Streatham to-night to dine with some tiresome people. They must be tiresome or they wouldn't live at Streatham. Good-bye, Mr. Cavanagh. It has been delightful to meet you, but I haven't heard half what I want about Bobby. You must come and see me. I shall be in on Tuesday. Good-bye, Lady Duncombe. Come, Norman."

She made her adieux, and her husband followed her across the room, bowing to Cavanagh with a rather odd look on his face, and as the door closed behind them Cecile Duncombe uttered a little sigh of relief, like a person who feels a strain relaxed.

As it happened, Tuesday found Richard fully occupied with affairs relating to his work, and the promised visit to Green Street did not come off, but a day or two later he met Mrs. Leighton again, and this time in company with his sister-in-law, for she made one of the party that Frank Cavanagh had made up for the motor-races at Brooklands.

The races were not particularly interesting, and four o'clock found the big drag on its homeward way, Richard sitting beside Mrs. Leighton, Hilda in front with her husband and a friend of his.

It was a beautiful day, the weather having repented itself of three days of ceaseless rain; overhead the sky was a clear vivid blue, flecked here and there with racing flecks of white cloud, while underfoot the roads were inches deep in mud and flashed great sheets of colour back from the myriad pools. The trees and the woods were already black with the rising sap, and about the undergrowth of the copses and the lines

of the hedges between the bare fields was a very faint mist of green, giving delicate promise of what another month would bring forth. A fresh spring wind roared in the tree branches and scoured across the tender growth of the cornfields, and in every hedgerow the wood-violets nestled, and the sheltered banks were yellow and fragrant with primroses.

Richard's pleasure in such a day and in the fairness of the English country was unbounded, and presently he turned to Mrs. Leighton.

"Isn't it a gorgeous day!" he said. "This spring air gets into my blood."

She met his eyes with a smile.

"I'm sure you are a model of decorum," she said. "We have behaved in a most exemplary fashion all day. But I should have thought England appeared rather too unexciting after India."

"I assure you it is perfection," he answered. "And, after all, India is anything but unending excitement, you know. Ask Bobby."

"Ah, Bobby! Do you know, I have hardly heard anything about Bobby. You must tell me all particulars about him. I am in on Monday afternoon."

"He's a good boy," Richard said lightly. "The best worker I could wish for."

She nodded.

"I'm glad. I envy him."

He looked at her in some surprise.

"Why?" he said rather bluntly.

"Because he can do so much. You both can do so much. Think what a stupid useless life I lead by comparison with yours!"

Richard smiled.

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you there," he replied. "After all, the uselessness or the reverse seems to me to lie in the doing of the things one has to do. And you do as much as I. The fact that the work is entirely different is nothing to do with it."

She sighed a little and gazed straight in front of her over the sunny fields.

"It is kind of you to comfort me," she said. "But there are times when the utter emptiness of modern life hurts me. It seems such a poor way of spending one's few years, just to follow the crowd and dance to the tune it pipes."

"There is always the chance that someone in the crowd may want helping," he said.

"Oh, I know. But that is a very cold consolation. I would so much rather be out of the crowd and able to walk . . . not dance."

He looked at her with grave eyes.

"Surely it depends on yourself?" he said. "You need not dance unless you wish it."

"That is just where the difficulty lies," she answered. "I am not strong enough to leave it. It is always difficult for a woman. Now, even for Bobby, boy as he is, it is easier."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. You see, he is not alone. He has you. If he does anything it will be owing to you."

He turned to her, a sudden smile lighting his eyes.

"Forgive my contradicting you," he said, "but that's utter nonsense. Bobby was bound to turn out well. He's got it in him."

"Don't you think we all might have had it in us if we had had Bobby's chances?"

"A man's chances, anyone's chances, are what they make them. If a man means to do well, he'll do it, in spite of all obstacles, and if he means to be a slacker, he'll be it."

She looked out across the country and spoke protestingly.

"Then you don't think outward circumstances are responsible for character?"

"I'm afraid we are too apt to think so."

Her eyes met his and she spoke low.

"I didn't know you judged so hardly," she said. "Somehow, I should not have expected it of you."

"I don't," he said, smiling a little. "But it is my business to judge fairly, according to the facts laid before me. I don't know, though, why we are talking of judging, do you?"

"No. Still"—she altered her voice to a gayer tone—"I wish that my opportunities were Bobby's."

"I am quite sure you should not," he retorted. "You use your own so charmingly."

A little laugh bubbled from her lips, and she looked away to hide the spark of triumph that leapt to her eyes.

Richard Cavanagh was no ladies' man, that everybody knew already, and here he was paying compliments as easily as any other man. The compliments, of course, meant nothing, but the spirit that prompted them meant a good

deal. Violet Leighton smiled triumphantly to herself; the lion was roaring very obligingly, and just for her own private benefit. She had seen the surprise on one man's face when she had casually mentioned to-day's drive, and the surprise had been as wine to her. Richard Cavanagh was interested in her, perhaps a little fascinated, and it depended now entirely upon her whether the fascination deepened into something greater or no. His personality charmed her, and there was something delightful in this particular matter, for he was no social butterfly, but a man who led his life on a big scale, close to the heart of things, a man whose sphere lay in the great world outside the boundaries of convention, touching daily the mysteries of life and death. He was worth capture, this strong man, so unlike his fellows, so completely unspoilt; a man worth the winning. Glancing at him narrowly from beneath her long lashes, she admired his physical attributes, his broad shoulders, the fine poise of his head, the resolute handsome profile, the strong curve of his jaw and chin. This man was unlike any other of her acquaintance; even in these few brief meetings she could see that. He had come from a place where life was lived on a broad scale, where death stood waiting for the unwary on every hand; he was at once simple and extraordinarily clever, utterly fearless, resourceful, level-headed, and endowed with great personal charm; a man who had done big things, and would yet do bigger. A born fighter, a gallant comrade . . . a rare lover. . . .

Violet Leighton pulled herself up short; the thoughts, hardly definite, had flashed through her mind in a few seconds, and now she put them hastily away from her and turned her attention to the present.

CHAPTER III

PANGLEY CHASE stood in the angle formed by the fork of the main London and Cambridge roads, a comfortable, old-fashioned white house, facing up the gentle slope of the London road as it ran southward, with water meadows to the east, and to the west an upward trend of tree-shaded fields.

The lawn in front ran to a sharp point in the angle between the roads, bounded by an ivy-clad wall, low enough for the road to be seen and the old white finger-post that stood at the parting of the ways ; and to the west, on the side of the house where the main road ran towards the little market-town, half a mile distant, was a higher wall fringed by trees—small firs, larches, slender silver birches, and the like—which screened the house from the dust of the road. This particular afternoon, nearly a month after Richard Cavanagh's arrival in England, Evelyn Chetwynde was sitting in the shade of the fir-trees, resting after a busy morning. It was very hot, and only the chirp of the birds and the drowsy hum of bees over a big bed of mignonette close to Evelyn's chair broke the silence ; and Evelyn, too lazy to read, contented herself with looking at the illustrations, and occasionally contemplating the pleasant view around her.

Ten yards away, lying on his back, innocent of coat or waistcoat, a linen hat tipped over his eyes, and his shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows, lay Hugh, her brother, fast asleep ; and Evelyn's eyes rested on his splendid young form with tenderness in their depths. He was just home after two years in the Art Schools of Paris, and, after rolling the lawn all the morning, he now lay asleep in the very hottest spot in the whole garden. She pondered on the advisability of waking him, decided it was too great an effort to make, and picked up the neglected magazine from her lap.

She opened it at random, then paused, and smiled at the sight of a man's photograph, with two lines of print underneath it :

" Mr. Richard Cavanagh, who has just been honoured by a private interview with His Majesty the King."

Richard Cavanagh !

The quiet garden faded away. She was back in the splendid ball-room at Buckingham Palace, with its brilliant lights, its flowers, its glittering jewels and sheen of colour ; and amidst all the splendour and crowd of faces, one man's face stood out boldly ; and through the music and the hum of voices and low laughter one man's voice came to her ears : " This will seem like a dream to me soon. My leave is up, and I sail to-morrow for India, for five years."

Was it really five years since she had looked into his eyes, with strange reluctance to bid him farewell ? She let her thoughts carry her back and lived the scene again, for his

personality had stood out in violent relief from the background of her gay young life, if only for the reason that there, amid the splendours of a brilliant Court, she had met—a man!

As she studied the photograph she felt he had changed. The crisply curling hair was brushed farther back from the broad forehead, the features were more set, the strong lips and chin stronger yet and harder; there was an air of immense latent strength about the face, a self-reliance and look of authority, and Evelyn knew that she had not forgotten this man—that she never would forget, even though her meeting with him had been so brief—and she wondered if, when they met again, he would recognize in her the maid-of-honour of the brilliant Court at Buckingham Palace.

Few people appreciated the fineness of Evelyn Chetwynde's action when, on her father's sudden death in the hunting-field, she retired from London life to devote herself to the upbringing of her younger brothers and sister.

The General had lived extravagantly, utterly ignorant of his financial condition, and at his death his children were left in anything but easy circumstances, whereupon Evelyn came to the rescue, left London, and settled down in the country.

It had been a source of great disappointment to the General that neither of his elder sons had followed in his footsteps and entered the Indian army. Gifford had studied surgery, and Hugh had gone to Paris to study Art, and at his death only Gifford was making any headway in his profession; while the two youngest boys, Hilary and Teddy, were mere children of nine and eleven, with their education still to come.

Beauty and the Beast had been the sobriquet given to Evelyn and Gifford many years before, and the names had stuck; for Gifford was not handsome, and Evelyn had been a lovely child, and a beautiful girl, and these five years had added to, rather than taken away from, her beauty, for she had fought discontent, comparative poverty, anxiety, and unutterable loneliness, and fought them gallantly, though how hard that fight had been no one would ever know.

Had she been questioned, she would have said that she was happy, without doubt, for she loved the children dearly, and the Chase was a pleasant home; but, nevertheless, there were times when she longed passionately, wildly, for just a glimpse of the gay, brilliant life of her youth.

The sound of wheels pulling up on the gravel roused her

from her long reverie, and, turning round, she saw Cecile Duncombe crossing the lawn to meet her.

"Evelyn, my dear, I'm so delighted to see you again!" she exclaimed as they met. "We only came down last night, so I came directly I could. London is impossible! Well, dear, how are you? Certainly lovelier than ever! Where are the others, and how is Diana?"

Evelyn led the way to the chairs in the shade as Cecile was talking, and tried to answer some of her questions.

"The children are out to tea with some of their friends," she said; "and Diana is out, too. Sit here, Cecile, and you get what breeze there is. It was very sweet of you to come and see me so soon. Yes, there is Hugh. He has been mowing the tennis-lawn all the morning, and it is so like him to go to sleep in the very hottest spot in the whole garden. He'll wake when tea comes. How is George?"

Cecile settled herself comfortably in a low chair, dropped her sunshade on the grass, pulled off her long gloves, and sighed luxuriously.

"He is perfectly well, the dear old thing, but he is getting steadily fatter. I left him in a punt under the trees."

"George in a punt! Do you mean to say he is actually taking so much exercise?"

"Oh dear, no! He's not punting! He is lying on the cushions, and Dick is doing the work. Richard Cavanagh, you know. He's with us."

"Richard Cavanagh?"

Evelyn echoed the name, all unconscious of the surprised joy of eyes and voice. "Is Richard Cavanagh down here?"

Lady Duncombe shot a quick look at her from beneath her lashes.

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

"I knew he was in England, of course," Evelyn answered. "But I did not think of his being at Yelverton. Gifford is coming down this evening. How pleased he will be!"

"You have not seen him yet, then?"

"No. I have only met him once, years ago. Shall I wake Hugh up?"

Cecile straightened a bracelet with extreme care then glanced again at Evelyn's face, faintly flushed, and strangely alert.

"Yes, I should," she said. "I am quite sure he ought not to sleep in the sun any longer."

Gently roused from his slumbers by the toe of Evelyn's shoe, Hugh tossed off the hat, and sat bolt upright, blinking very fast and staring round him.

"Hullo! Have I been to sleep? I'm so . . . who the deuce . . ."

He gave a joyful shout at Cecile's laugh, and scrambled to his feet.

"You! By Jove! I am glad to see you again!"

"And I you," she answered, taking his two hands in hers. "How well you look, and how brown you are! I was just telling Evelyn that we only came down last night. And how is my beloved Paris?"

"Hot as blazes! Grilling under a sun powerful enough to roast an ox. This is just pleasantly warm by contrast. How do you think Evelyn is looking?"

Cecile turned her head and looked at her friend, a very tender light in her eyes.

"Even more beautiful!" she said very softly; and at her words the delicate colour in Evelyn's face deepened, and she smiled, the smile effectually dispelling the sadness that always touched her face in repose.

"You are talking a great deal of nonsense!" she said. "Cecile, will you excuse me a moment, dear? I want to speak to Mary."

"I'll do it!" Hugh exclaimed; but Evelyn shook her head.

"I would rather do it myself, thank you, dear," she said; and as she crossed the lawn Hugh flung himself again on the grass, and watched her till she entered the house. Then he turned to Lady Duncombe.

"You are right when you say she is more beautiful," he said enthusiastically. "Do you know"—he turned to her and spoke more confidentially—"I came home with exactly two francs in my pocket! And she never even hinted that I should have done better. I told her I had blued my last cheque on a week's motor-tour in Brittany and round about, and even then she didn't say I'd been extravagant. What a sister to have! He'll be a lucky beggar who marries her, and shan't I envy him!"

Cecile looked down at the handsome face, so full of vitality and joyous youth; then, stretching out her hand, patted his dark head caressingly.

"I agree with you, every word; and you are a dear boy yourself!" she said. "Bless you, infant!"

Hugh rolled over, seized the hand, and kissed it.

"Voilà madame! Vous êtes très charmante! Where's George?"

"Asleep on the river. Richard Cavanagh is staying with us, and he insisted on George getting into a punt. Needless to say, he won't do any work."

"Cavanagh? Which Cavanagh? The Indian chap?"

"Yes. You knew he was a great friend of your brother's, of course."

"I'd forgotten. I haven't see Gifford yet, and I don't particularly want to. He is not very pleased with me. But I want to meet Cavanagh most tremendously. He is the sort of man who does big things. Do bring him over!"

"Of course I will. But you must come over yourself."

"I will. To tell you the truth, I am rather funkng meeting Gifford to-night. You see, I ought to have done better, but, somehow, people won't buy pictures, and I'm not a salesman. You want such infernal cheek to get your work off, and Gifford doesn't understand. He thinks it's only a question of hard work; he can't see that a man may stick at it till his eyes ache and his hand drops, but that won't make him sell his stuff. And I have worked. I don't say I've not fooled away the money when it came, but I've never slacked, and I've not gone off the rails, and I don't think he'll understand that that is not easy in the Quarter."

He paused a moment, plucking thoughtfully at the grass with thin, nervous fingers, the joyousness stuck out of his face, and a certain hardness replacing it; then he went on speaking bitterly.

"Gifford has been one of the lucky ones," he said—"one of the men who are born to get on—and therefore he does not understand what an artist has got to fight. There is a deuce of a lot of rot talked about the artistic temperament, but it does exist, and it's the very devil to deal with . . . and no one who has not got it understands what a thing it is to be up against."

"Are you sure Gifford does not understand?" Cecile asked gently.

"Quite sure. He wrote to me a fortnight ago, and I suppose I shall have to take a tutorship or something. Here's Evelyn. Don't say anything. I don't want her to be worried."

He flopped back on the grass, and surveyed his sister

through half-closed eyes as she came across the grass towards them.

"Tea is coming," she called; "also Nancy!"

Almost before the words had left her lips a slim little figure came out of the house and raced across the grass to Lady Duncombe's side.

"Oh!" a breathless voice exclaimed, "I'm so frightfully pleased to see you, and so is Evelyn! How do you do? Is Renée here?"

Lady Duncombe kissed the eager face and smiled.

"She is at Yelverton, and sent much love to you, but I could not bring her with me this afternoon. How are you after all this time?"

"I'm perfectly well, and I've oceans to tell her!" Nancy remarked, subsiding into the nearest chair. "I hope you will let her come over quite soon. Isn't Hugh brown?"

"Very. How is the writing?"

Nancy's pale expressive face lit up as though some inward fire had kindled into flame at the words; her great dark eyes shone, and she leant forward, her slim fingers locked together, clenching each other in their nervous exhilaration, till the knuckles stood out white and polished.

"Oh, it's just going splendidly!" she exclaimed. "I've begun another story, and it's just what I want; the only thing is that I can't quite get my man! I can't exactly see his face. His name's Rupert de Lisle. It's a Stuart story—Charles the First, and Rupert's going to save the life of Lady Gabrielle—that's the King's ward—in the Civil War; but I can't quite get his face yet. It's a nuisance."

Hugh wriggled along the grass, and, reaching up a hand, pulled her curly dark hair.

"Bravo! Miss Nancy Chetwynde, the famous novelist! You won't know your ne'er-do-well brother then, will you? Hullo! here is tea!" whereupon he fell to upon strawberries and shrimp sandwiches, and declared them very good, taking alternate bites of each, despite Lady Duncombe's exclamations of horror.

About seven that evening Gifford arrived, and Hugh, not appearing at dinner, Nancy explained that he had gone for a long walk, whereat Gifford's brows drew together in an ominous little frown, and Evelyn, knowing its reason, made haste to change the topic of conversation.

"Lady Duncombe called this afternoon," she said, "and

she told me that Mr. Richard Cavanagh is staying at Yelverton ; but perhaps you know that already ? ”

The frown fled at once.

“ No, I did not,” he said. “ By Jove ! That is splendid ! I must see the dear old chap to-morrow. I saw him last Saturday, and he had not decided whether to come down now or later.”

Diana St. John, an orphan cousin, who lived at Pangley, looked up with a little grimace.

“ He is submitting to lionizing, I suppose ! ” she said. “ I don’t know Lady Hilda Cavanagh very well, but I am quite sure he will have to do as he is told while he is with her.”

“ Did you ever meet him ? ” Evelyn asked, turning to her ; and Diana nodded.

“ Once, several years ago, before he went out this last time. It was just after my presentation, and I met him at some dinner-party. Is he really so charming as Sir George says, Gifford ? I am sometimes quite certain that he must be spoilt ! ”

“ He is the best man on God’s earth ! ” Gifford answered ; and at the fervour of his tone Diana subsided, only smiling a little at Evelyn, while Gifford turned to his sister.

“ I’ll ask them all over to-morrow, if you don’t mind,” he said. “ Let Hilary take a note, will you ? It won’t be dark before he gets back.”

The following morning broke hot and cloudless, and before breakfast was over the slight breeze that had been born with the sunrise had died away, the leaves were still, the birds chirped lazily, and only the bees, brown and velvety showed any signs of active life. Hugh had announced his intention of spending the morning under the trees, and at his words Gifford spoke significantly.

“ I’ll join you, then. Evelyn, are you going out ? ”

“ Yes, and as it is so hot, I think we ought to be soon starting. Come, Nancy ! Good-bye, everybody ! ”

It certainly was exceedingly hot, even walking through the meadows to the little grey Norman church, a mile and a half away ; but the weather was too perfect to grumble at, and Evelyn greatly preferred the longer walk to Yelverton to the parish church at Pangley. The coolness of the building was very grateful after the heat of the fields and road, and even the dismal little voluntary played by the vicar’s wife ceased to be depressing on such a perfect morning. She had

played the same tune ever since her husband's induction, and it had been a puzzle to Evelyn for years why she always made the same two mistakes. Every Sunday morning and evening Mrs. Bennett struggled through the same thirty bars, and every Sunday Evelyn resolved to take no notice and occupy her mind more worthily—all to no avail. She was listening with a dreadful fascination to the bar preceding the first error, when Nancy's voice whispered :

"There's Lady Duncombe ! "

And, looking across to the little arched door, she saw the Yelverton party entering. Cecile came first, charmingly dressed, as always ; Renée followed her, a dainty little ten-year-old maiden in white ; and, following Renée, wearing a dark blue serge suit, his face rather set and stern, came Richard Cavanagh.

For a moment a mist swam before Evelyn's eyes ; then, as it cleared off, she saw him take his place in the pew next to Cecile, saw his white teeth gleam in a sudden smile as she spoke to him ; then felt Nancy tug her sleeve, and heard her loud, excited whisper :

"Evelyn, I've got him ! I've got him ! He's Rupert de Lisle. Oh, I hope Mr. Bennett will be quick ! "

Her hopes were vain, for Mr. Bennett read the service even slower than usual, and Mrs. Bennett improvised at such length, and in so many keys, at every conceivable opportunity, that it was nearly twenty minutes later than usual before he entered the pulpit and gave out his text. Once Evelyn glanced at her little sister. Nancy was leaning forward, both slim brown hands clasped round one knee, her face absorbed, her eyes fixed on the distant glimpse of Richard Cavanagh's head.

At last the service was over, the Benediction pronounced, and the little organ once more being tormented by its well-meaning player, while the congregation streamed out into the brilliant summer sunshine.

Renée Duncombe made a bee-line for Nancy, who received her with one word, "Rupert !" and Renée, checking her eager greeting, squeezed her arm, and relapsed into silence.

Bowing and smiling to her various acquaintances, Lady Duncombe passed through the little groups of people in the churchyard, Richard Cavanagh beside her, Sir George just behind, and came to Evelyn's side.

"Good-morning ! Isn't it hot ? May I present an old

acquaintance? Richard, I think you have met Miss Chetwynde."

Richard lifted his hat, and for a brief second his eyes searched Evelyn's face; then a smile flashed out over his own, and he held out his hand.

"Yes," he said, "five years ago! Do you remember?"

Evelyn bowed.

"Yes, I remember," she said. "At Buckingham Palace."

"You were a maid-of-honour. . . . Do you remember we talked about India? I never guessed you were Gifford's sister. How strange!"

Sir George's hearty "How do you do, Evelyn? Delighted to see you!" made Evelyn aware that her hand still lay in Cavanagh's, and, with the faintest deepening of her colour, she drew it away and turned to greet Sir George. Meanwhile, Cecile, her hand on Diana's arm, was pausing by her carriage.

"You must all come over this afternoon," she was saying—"all—Evelyn and yourself, and Gifford, and Hugh, and Nancy. I won't take 'No!' Evelyn; I'm just saying that I shall expect you all this afternoon. It's so seldom I have a chance of seeing you all. No, you are not too many! What nonsense! Diana, the responsibility rests with you!"

She entered the carriage before Evelyn had time to refuse; Cavanagh and her husband followed her, and the horses started forward, leaving Evelyn's protest but half uttered.

Meanwhile, at home, in the shade of the lime-trees, Hugh had waited half an hour for his brother, and reviewed the rather disagreeable situation.

At his own urgent request, and much against Gifford's wishes, he had been sent to Paris, full of the brilliant future that awaited him, confident of his ability to get his living, and eager to help the rather scanty home funds. He had kept himself, it is true, but he had not contributed one penny to the home income that he had been so desirous of enlarging, and he had not yet repaid Gifford the money he had advanced for his training. Careless, impetuous, and generous to a fault, he was his father over again, utterly unable to refuse any request for help, or to refrain from spending his money before it was due. Consequently, even when a picture sold unusually well, the money was nearly always owing, and had to be parted with at once.

It was at Evelyn's special request he had come home now, and, as far as he could see, there was not much chance of his

going back again. He had attained a small measure of success, but, as he had told Lady Duncombe, he had returned as poor as when he started, and in debt to his brother to the extent of two hundred pounds. It was this debt that was worrying him to-day. He had taken the money when Gifford could ill spare it, because he had supreme faith in himself ; and he had not justified that faith—at least, not to the world.

Gifford's voice interrupted his rather dreary thoughts.

"Give me a light, Hugh."

Hugh rolled over, lit a match, waited while Gifford lit his cigarette, then plunged nervously into the trouble he saw ahead.

"I suppose Evelyn has told you I am broke to the world ? " he said, with a laugh that hardly rang true.

Gifford's cigarette was arrested half-way to his lips ; he looked at his brother with a sudden hardening of his face.

"Hullo ! What's that ? She's told me nothing. You have been selling, haven't you ? "

"Yes, a bit ; but money melts over there."

"So it appears," Gifford said dryly, and smoked for a moment in silence ; then he spoke again.

"Well, what do you propose to do now ? "

Hugh bit his lip ; he knew he need not fear a violent outburst of anger, but the very scantiness of Gifford's comments always made them to be dreaded the more.

"Go back again, I suppose," he said shortly ; and then, rolling over, began pulling the short grass with restless fingers.

There was another silence ; then Gifford knocked the ash off his cigarette very carefully.

"Frank Cavanagh wants a secretary who speaks French and German thoroughly," he said. "I happen to know that he would be willing to take you. What do you think of it ? "

Hugh's fingers left off pulling the grass ; he lay very still, apparently staring across the grass, in reality facing the—to him—appalling prospect his brother's words had opened out. Gifford was not looking at him, or he would have seen his face grow slowly white to the lips, seen the lithe form stiffen, and the jaw clench tightly.

The silence stretched into minutes, and still Hugh kept hoping against hope that Gifford would speak to tell him that his words had only been the merest and wildest suggestion, and that, of course, nothing must stand in the way of his art ;

but Gifford remained silent, and slowly Hugh realized that what he had never seriously contemplated had come to pass.

Presently, puzzled by receiving no answer, Gifford glanced at his brother; and as his attitude looked sulky, he uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Why the deuce can't you answer me?"

Hugh spoke in a level voice that Gifford completely misunderstood.

"Because I have nothing to say."

"Did you hear what I said?"

Hugh shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not deaf," he answered carelessly. "Why?"

"Then have the goodness to answer my question!"

"Your question?"

Hugh sat up, ran his fingers through his hair, lit another cigarette, and looked full into his brother's face.

"What was it?" he asked. "I've forgotten!"

And at that Gifford's sorely tried patience gave way.

"Damn your forgetfulness!" he said angrily. "I have no doubt it is very convenient to have such a short memory, and since you do not think my suggestion worth even the courtesy of a reply, may I inquire what you intend to live on?"

Hugh blew a cloud of smoke at a passing butterfly, and his nonchalance stung Gifford into unwonted cruelty.

"I suppose you intend to live here on Evelyn," he said. "Her convenience or happiness means nothing to you, so long as your own life isn't interfered with. Go your own damned way, and paint your own damned pictures, and much good may they all do you!"

He would have given a good deal to unsay the words directly they had crossed his lips, for, at the mention of Evelyn's name, Hugh's eyes met his with horror in their depths.

"Evelyn!" he said, hardly above his breath. "Why should I want to hurt Evelyn?"

Gifford got up and tossed a dead match across the grass.

"How should I know what you want to do?" he said; and Hugh was silent.

Gifford was already reproaching himself for his hastiness, but the very fact of this made him physically unable to utter a word to tell Hugh so. He was an intensely reserved man, and he did not in the least understand his brother's diverse nature. He did not see that Hugh's flippancy was but a desperate effort to hide his real feelings, any more than Hugh

guessed that Gifford's harshness of manner was only the cloak to the eager anxiety of a very deep love. Both misunderstood each other, and the morning's discussion had the makings of a very pretty quarrel.

When the others returned from church, they found the mental atmosphere a trifle thundery, which Evelyn's news of Cavanagh's arrival only partially relieved, and luncheon was a somewhat silent meal, for Hugh barely spoke, and Nancy, who was usually such a chatterbox, was absorbed in worlds of her own.

Shortly after the meal was over Evelyn went in search of her brother, and found him standing at the window of his study, a small room facing west, idly turning the pages of a magazine, and frowning irritably. He looked up at her entrance.

"Is it time to start?" he asked; and she shook her head.

"No; it's only half-past two. I came to ask you something else. Gifford, what did you say to Hugh? His eyes made my heart ache at luncheon."

Gifford shrugged his shoulders, and his conscience gave him a sharp prick.

"Told him he'd got to work!" he said. "I've proposed that he should go to Frank Cavanagh. He wants a secretary and he's willing to take him."

"Gifford!"

Evelyn's exclamation of amazement made Gifford bite his lip.

"Are you, too, going to say I've been cruel?" he said harshly. "I suppose you think he ought to be encouraged in his careless selfishness? I tell you it will be the ruin of him. What he wants is work—hard, uncongenial work, that will teach him that life isn't made up of fitful student pleasures, or the painting of decadent pictures—work that will make a man of him!"

While he spoke, Evelyn's eyes had been studying his face, and now she came to his side and laid her hand on his arm.

"My dear," she said gently, "be just! Hugh does not paint decadent pictures, and he has worked very hard at his art. Don't speak like that of him . . . it's only that you don't understand him. He's not idle, and he's not selfish, but he's very young and very lovable. Do you wonder people try to spoil him, and to distract him from his work? What he wants is responsibility, not anger. If you can't afford for

him to go back, he must do as you say, and get some other work to do over here ; that cannot be helped, and i he means to do big things, it will not really stop him. Only don't be too hasty ! Don't misunderstand ! ”

There was a moment's pause ; then Gifford put down his book, and accompanied her towards the door.

“ You're right, Evelyn,” he said wearily ; “ you always are. I don't understand him. I think he shows his worst side to me. I don't know why. I seem rather a failure with all of them, save you.”

Evelyn's fingers tightened on his arm.

“ Never with me,” she said, and her voice deepened with a sudden tenderness. “ Now come out into the garden and rest. It is so cool under the trees.”

So Gifford suffered himself to be led out into the garden, and spent the next hour lying on his back on the grass, smoking and gazing at the blue sky, where it showed itself through the trellis work of leaves above his head, wondering for what reason he had so signally failed with his younger brother.

Yelverton Hall this hot afternoon lay asleep in the sun—a big red-brick house, built by Inigo Jones, with three long rows of windows, shaded now by red-and-white striped sun-blinds ; the high lands of the park rising behind it, and in front and around wide lawns splashed with vivid colour, the beds of geraniums, calceolarias, lobelias, and begonias, of every hue, looking like new Turkey carpets flung down against the green velvet of the turf.

Under the group of cedars to the right of the tennis-lawns were some chairs and a couple of hammocks, the latter occupied by Sir George Duncombe and Richard Cavanagh, the latter reading *Punch*, the former doing nothing but smoke and doze. Renée, in the biggest of the chairs, looked up from her book at a shout of laughter from Richard, and remarked :

“ Here's mother . . . and Evelyn . . . and the others.”

Punch fell to the ground, and Richard tumbled hastily out of the hammock as Lady Duncombe and her guests emerged from the open windows of the drawing-room, Sir George chuckling at his friend's dishevelled appearance.

“ Look as though I'd pulled you through a hedge backwards ! ” he said. “ And you're all green down the back. I told you not to lie on the grass ! ”

“ Oh, you are always immaculate ! ” Richard retorted,

trying vainly to rub the offending colour from his trousers. "I believe if I dropped you in the middle of a jungle, you'd still look like Savile Row. Hullo! Here's Gifford!"

Gifford, in advance of his hostess and sister, hurried forward and greeted his two friends warmly.

"How fit you look, old chap!" he said, laying his hand affectionately on Richard's shoulder. "You didn't tell me you were coming down here."

"I didn't know myself till yesterday. George carried me off. How do you do, Miss Chetwynde? Won't you have this chair? I can thoroughly recommend it!"

Evelyn accepted with a smile, and Richard drew his to her side, and for a little she was content to rest after the hot two-mile walk, and leave the talking to others, till Richard turned to her with a question.

"Do you remember that night?" he said. "Lady Duncombe was asking me about it."

She shook her head. "No, I never heard of it," she said. "What night?"

"The last night before I sailed last leave. We dined at the Savoy, went to the Palace, went to three clubs, till we were kicked out of all, and kept it up at my rooms till six. We all escorted each other home. George looted a hansom and drove three of us round Berkeley Square, while Gifford and Lane (Lane was in the Guards) soothed the cabby's feelings; . . . and Lane painted little niggers all round the street-door of my rooms afterwards, as a sort of delicate compliment to my future supposed surroundings; then, because I pointed out to him that India did not possess niggers, he hung a printed apology over the door. Gifford draped Frank's windows with Union Jacks. Do you remember, Giff? Wasn't Hilda furious? And it didn't help matters a bit when you explained that you wanted to honour the house that had devoted such a promising scion to the service of the Empire! Gad! It was a night!"

He threw back his head with a joyous shout of laughter at the recollection, and Cecile drew her chair closer.

"I remember the episode of the niggers!" she exclaimed. "George took me to see them the day after you had gone, and there were workmen trying to get them off. But I never heard about the Union Jacks or the hansoms. How splendid!"

"Oh, the memory of it made me laugh many a time afterwards! They are times to remember, you know. They

keep one young! And, by Jove, I'm beginning to need it!"

He passed his hand ruefully over his hair, tinged with grey now at the temples, and looked at Evelyn.

"I want another time like that now," he said. "Hullo! Who's this?"

Lady Duncombe looked towards the house. "Nancy," she said; and as the child came up, Evelyn spoke:

"Mr. Cavanagh, this is my little sister."

Nancy lifted an eager face, and met Richard's smile with the vivid colour of excitement flashing over her own.

"How do you do?" she said shyly, despite her delight.

"I came over to walk back with Evelyn. You've met Evelyn all the afternoon, haven't you?"

He nodded.

"Yes, we have been talking a long while. I was just hearing about you when you came. Suppose you sit down here, and then we can talk to each other."

Nancy's eyes shone. He, her hero, was anxious to talk to her! The child's horizon was flushed rose-colour, and shyness forgotten; she took the chair he drew forward, and soon was chatting to him far more freely than she ever did to anyone other than Evelyn.

Richard Cavanagh, for his part, was equally attracted to the eager, impetuous child. He liked all children, but this little girl had something unusually charming about her, and he found himself listening with a good deal of pleasure to her chatter, and watching with much interest the great dark eyes and sensitive, resolute little mouth.

In colouring she was utterly unlike her sister, but once or twice he detected a strong resemblance in some trick of manner or fleeting expression, and he fell in love with her charm; while, for her part, she surrendered to him the whole of her admiration and loving little soul.

For ten years Richard had worked as few men work, testing every nerve of heart and brain, taxing every power of endurance to the uttermost, and now, at thirty-six, he was clean and hard through and through, trained and fit in every fibre of body and soul. He did not realize this, or naturally, had he done so, his fineness would have ceased to exist; indeed, he very seldom had time to think about himself at all. But others did, and loved and admired him for it—for all the splendid prowess of his body, and the courage and tenderness of his heart;

and, all unknowingly, this child recognized and appreciated the charm of his personality, and unhesitatingly trusted her childish heart to his keeping.

When Evelyn rose to leave, an hour later, Cecile offered to drive her home, but she preferred to walk, and, while Cecile bade farewell to the others, found herself walking slowly towards the gates in company with Richard Cavanagh. Just as they reached them he spoke.

"I can't say how glad I am that we have met again!" he said frankly. "Don't let our friendship fall through! It's stood the test of five years, hasn't it? I never thought that you, the maid-of-honour, and you, Evelyn, Gifford's sister, were one and the same person. What an idiot I was! When Gifford wrote to me last summer, and said he wanted me to meet you, I wondered what you were like!"

"I know! Isn't it often the way, that the most obvious thing in the world does not attract our attention till it is pointed out to us? And now that we have met again, there is so much I want to hear about Kultänn. I shall probably weary you with shop directly I have an opportunity; but you must be merciful, and remember that I am hungry for news of my own country . . . for real personal news of the land where I was born."

He turned a little and faced her, his grey eyes on hers.

"You will never weary me by talking of Kultänn or anything that concerns it," he said. "It is the place and the work that means life to me. I am speaking frankly, but I know you will understand!"

"Yes," she said—"always!" And then a sudden smile flashed over her face.

"How serious we are!" she added, as they shook hands. "But Kultänn is so dear to me. Here is Cecile, so I must not keep you. Good-night, Mr. Cavanagh, and I hope you won't forget your words and promise!"

CHAPTER IV

THE following Thursday was Lady Duncombe's garden-party, and dawned cloudless and hot, the very perfection of an English summer day.

At Pangley Chase, Evelyn being busy, Diana had taken the children's lessons for her, and, being unused to teaching, and also slightly tired with the excessive heat of the day, she did not prove the wisest of instructors. Indeed, half-way through the morning, smouldering irritability broke out into open rebellion, which ended in Alec upsetting a bottle of ink all over the schoolroom-table, and Nancy, after one of her rare outbursts of temper, escaping through the open window to the freedom of the garden.

When she came in to luncheon, prepared to carry on her plan of defiance and uphold her cause as right at all costs, she found to her surprise that there was no necessity for her to do so, for Evelyn welcomed her with a smile, and Hugh pulled her hair affectionately as she passed him, and inquired after the well-being of Sir Rupert. She answered at random, and cast an inquiring glance at Diana, who smiled at her as though the events of the morning were blotted from the memory, and went on talking to Evelyn.

A dull shamed red crept up into Nancy's face ; she ate very little and spoke less, so obviously wishing to be left alone that Evelyn thought the heat must be upsetting her, and did not press her to eat. About three o'clock, however, as he was dressing, there came a knock at the door, and Nancy entered, still clad in her navy linen smock.

"Please, I don't want to go this afternoon," she said, speaking very quickly, and holding hard on to the door-handle. "Do you mind if I don't?"

Evelyn turned to her in amazement.

"Not go, Nancy dear? Why? Aren't you well?"

"Quite, thank you ; but I'd rather not go. Please, Evelyn! Please say I needn't!"

Evelyn's eyes searched her little sister's face anxiously, but something she saw there prevented her from asking any further questions.

"Very well," she said at last. "I don't know what Lady Duncombe will say, Nancy, because you were specially

invited, but still I do not wish to insist. Shall I give any message ? ”

“ Will you say I am sorry, but it was unavoidable ? I’ll not get into a scrape, I promise. Thank you ! ”

She went out, closing the door very quietly after her, leaving Evelyn more than a little perplexed, but too wise to worry her into an explanation she evidently did not wish to give.

Two hours later Richard Cavanagh, escaping for a few minutes from the gay throng of people on the lawns, took a hasty walk to the Lodge gates to see if the afternoon post had brought him any letters, and was returning empty-handed when, at a point where the road ran nearest to the house, he stumbled over a crouching figure, half hidden in a rhododendron-bush.

“ What the—— ” He pulled himself up in the exclamation as the figure rolled over and sat up, shrinking back against the bushes, with a shamed flush on the cheeks. For a moment Richard was at a loss ; then he remembered.

“ Why, Nancy ! ” he said. “ Did I hurt you ? ”

Nancy rose to her feet—a crumpled, untidy, and unutterably forlorn little figure.

“ No, thank you,” she said hurriedly. “ I . . . I was . . . just resting. . . . I’m going back now.”

She turned half away, then added as an afterthought :

“ Please don’t tell anyone you’ve seen me.”

“ Certainly not ! ” he said, so promptly that she smiled—a faint little smile that went to his heart. He laid his hand on her shoulder.

“ What’s the matter ? ” he asked gently. “ Won’t you let me see if I can help you ? ”

She shrank away from him, but he would not let her go, and instead, drew her to sit down on a low grass bank just behind them, and well out of everyone’s sight.

“ Something’s gone wrong, kiddie, hasn’t it ? ” he said. “ I might be able to help a bit. Two heads are often better than one, you know ! ”

Nancy met his compelling grey eyes, that seemed to look into her very soul, and saw the tenderness behind their steady regard. She bit her lips, fighting hard for self-control, and Cavanagh, seeing how it was, let go of her shoulder and lit a cigarette.

“ Renée told me yesterday that you are writing a story about the Civil War,” he said, paying great attention to the

match. "It's very clever of you. I couldn't think of the first sentences, let alone a book." Will you tell me about it? It's rather a favourite period of history with me."

Nancy responded to the interest in his voice like a flower to the sun, and plunging into the thing that lay so near her heart, told him the whole story of Sir Rupert de Lisle and Lady Gabrielle, in tones that were a little tremulous at first, but soon steadied as she lost herself in her subject.

Cavanagh watched her curiously. When he had met her fifteen minutes ago he had been struck with the tragic misery of her expression, and the dejection visible in every line of her slim little form; but now her face was flushed, her eyes shining, her voice thrilling with excitement. The child's whole personality was radiant and eager, and the change was extraordinary. At the end of the recital he nodded comprehendingly.

"By Jove! that's most interesting!" he exclaimed heartily enough to satisfy even her. "It's a splendid plot. I should like you to read it to me. How much of it is written?"

"Five chapters. I got a little stuck last week, but it's all right now. I couldn't quite see Sir Rupert. Do you like the name of Rupert?"

"Immensely! It always seems to me that Ruperts ought to be dark, strong men. He is dark, isn't he?"

"Yes. I got him on Sunday. I thought of him quite suddenly."

"That's good. You know, your description of Lady Gabrielle rather reminds me of your sister."

"Why, that's who it is!" Nancy cried delightfully. "I wanted her to be just like that. Sir Rupert is rather nice, too, don't you think?"

Cavanagh, not having the slightest idea of Sir Rupert's original model, assented heartily; and Nancy, entranced by his interest, chattered on gaily, till she suddenly remembered that she was keeping him from the gardens, and the radiance died out of her face.

"You ought to go, oughtn't you?" she said sadly. "It's been awfully nice of you to be so interested. You were right. . . . I was feeling dreadful when you fell over me. . . . You see . . . I ought to have been there"—waving one hand toward the distant gardens—"but I was impertinent and disobedient this morning . . . and so . . . I couldn't come with the others."

Richard did not speak, but took her hand in his and held it, and after a moment's pause she went on :

" You see, Diana hadn't split, and Evelyn would have let me come, but that would have been so dreadfully mean, and I said I'd rather stay at home. So I did. Only—I just wanted to see . . . to see. . . ."

She broke off flushing hotly, and pulling the short grass with the fingers of her left hand, while her right clutched his in a tight grip. He nodded.

" I understand. Hard luck ! But wasn't it rather doing penance ? Trying to bargain about it ? So much naughtiness . . . very well, so much suffering to balance it straight ? And one can't ever balance straight, you know."

Nancy met his eyes gravely.

" No, it wasn't that," she said. " But, you see, I am a soldier's daughter, and I can remember that father said insubordination must take its punishment. It's a breach of discipline, you see, and you must take your fatigue duty. It seems fairer, too."

There was a moment's silence ; then, to Nancy's surprise and incredulous rapture, Richard drew her close to him and kissed her.

" I see, dear," he said. " And, though it's hard luck, it's fairer, as you say."

There was a moment's pause ; then he took out his watch.

" Still, I think the fatigue duty has been pretty heavy, and there is no need to make it disproportionate to the offence," he said. " It's just five o'clock. I think it would be quite fair for you to come now. You have missed half, or will have—that makes it about right."

Wild hope lit Nancy's face, and a flush rose to her face.

" Oh ! " she said, in a curious strangled voice. " Are you sure ? Quite sure ? "

" Quite," he answered gravely. " Now you must change your frock, mustn't you ? so if you'll go to the Lodge gates, I'll meet you there with the car, and drive you to Pangley, and bring you back again. Then we shall be here again by a quarter to six, and you will have half an hour or so—if you are quick—more. Off you go ! "

There was little need for the last injunction, for she raced away, while Cavanagh hurried round to the stables, and meeting the chauffeur at the garage door, gave the order.

" I want the car at once for half an hour," he said. " No,

you need not come with me ; but please send someone to tell Lady Duncombe that I shall be back almost directly, and that I will explain my absence then."

Ten minutes later, eyes shining, lips parted, hair blowing wildly backward, Nancy was being driven to Pangley Chase at a pace well over the speed-limit, too excited to talk, but every now and then glancing at Cavanagh with adoring eyes.

When they arrived at the Chase, he waited for her in the drawing-room ; but presently, thinking she was rather a long while, he went out into the hall, and found her halfway downstairs.

"Hullo, kiddie ! Not ready yet ?" he asked, seeing the unfastened frock and anxious eyes.

She shook her head.

"I can't fasten my frock !" was the forlorn answer. "And I can't make Ellen hear !"

"No need to !" he answered. "Come upstairs and let me have a try. Turn round. That's right ! Now stand still. How on earth—yes, yes, I see !"

When the dainty white frock was fastened, he looked her over critically.

"Give me a brush !" he commanded, and when she had obeyed proceeded to brush the rough mane into a sheeny mass of curls, watched her change her shoes for buckled slippers, set the big black hat at a becoming angle, pulled the folds of the frock straight, and nodded.

"That's charming. Got a clean handkerchief ? That's all right, then. Come along !"

Evelyn, sitting under the cedars with her host, was amazed to see Richard Cavanagh approaching her with Nancy by his side, as different a Nancy from the forlorn little object she had last seen as it was possible to imagine. When they reached her side, Cavanagh spoke.

"Miss Chetwynde, I persuaded your little sister to come, after all, so here she is. Georgie, old man, I borrowed the car without any scruples, but it's still whole. May I not get you an ice, Miss Chetwynde ? Nancy is going to have one ?"

"Thank you, yes," Evelyn replied, and as he turned away she took Nancy's hand.

"I am so glad you came, after all, darling ; but how did you manage to fasten your frock and do your hair so nicely ? Did Ellen do it ?"

Nancy gripped her hand closely as she hurriedly explained the situation, ending up with words of excited praise.

"He fastened my frock, and did my hair, and made me change my shoes, and asked me if I had a clean hanky, and motored me back in Sir George's car. Oh, Evelyn! Isn't he splendid?"

Cavanagh's return at that moment prevented her from replying, but she looked up at him with very warm gratitude in her eyes.

"It was very good of you!" she said. "Nancy has told me about your kindness. Thank you very much indeed."

His eyes met hers.

"I did very little," he said. "It was too bad that she should miss it all . . . wasn't it, kiddie?"

His last words were for Nancy, but his eyes were still on Evelyn's, an almost boyish pleasure in their depths.

"Really, it was nothing!" he repeated; but Nancy looked up at him adoringly.

"It was the thinking of the things that was so splendid of you," she said earnestly. "Sir George might have motored me home, but he'd never have thought of the hooks on my frock, or my hair, or a hanky! That was just you!"

A flush crept up under his tanned skin at the child's words, and a smile crept to Evelyn's lips at the sight of his obvious embarrassment; but Sir George, returning at this moment, saved him from the necessity of an answer, and Renée, who followed her father, claimed Nancy's attention.

As for Cavanagh, he strolled across the gardens with Sir George, growled at the crowd, and seeing Hugh Chetwynde standing by himself, and evidently intensely bored, crossed over to him and suggested a stroll.

"Let's get out of this throng!" he said. "I can't stand it. Come and have a smoke!"

Hugh turned to him with a smile chasing the sullenness from his face.

"With pleasure," he answered; and they went off together and, sauntering from the gardens, struck into the park, leaving the crowd behind them.

Cavanagh had the knack of putting people very much at their ease with him, and Hugh proved no exception to the rule. He began to speak of Paris and his life there, and by-and-by—haltingly at first—of his ambition and failure, so that after a little while it ceased to be strange that he should be

speaking of the things deep down in his heart to a man he had only known a few days, for there was that about Cavanagh that invited confidence and impelled trust, and Hugh spoke openly of the things he had hidden from all the world.

"I don't know what to do," he said as they walked slowly to and fro. "You see, I could keep myself if I went back to Paris, easily; but I can't earn enough to help them at home, and I can't repay Gifford. He's looking awfully fagged, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid he is," Cavanagh was forced to admit. "And you say he can get you a decently paid appointment?"

"Yes, right away. What do you think I ought to do?"

Cavanagh made no immediate comment, and they continued their walk in silence. Behind them, hidden by trees and shrubs, lay the gardens—less crowded now, for people were leaving; around them lay the open stretch of park, and immediately in front the lake lay, like a sheet of gold in the evening sunshine, the gnats dancing in myriads over its placid surface, the swallows darting and hovering above it, tiny specks of black against the golden glory of sky and water.

To and fro, walking noiselessly upon the soft grass, they paced, both smoking and both deep in thought. Cavanagh knew that Hugh was waiting to hear his opinion, guessed that he would follow his advice, and he put off the moment of giving it, for it seemed a cruel thing to blast the boy's hopes and condemn him to a life he hated, even if it were but for a year of two; yet he never wavered for an instant in his decision.

Used to dealing with men, Cavanagh was an unerring judge of them, and, while sympathizing with Hugh from the bottom of his heart, he yet knew that, both for his art's sake and for his character's no less, Gifford's plan, cruel though it seemed, was the wisest course.

Hugh's powers would be all the more matured, his capacity for seeing the beautiful in no way impaired, his ability to paint a great picture all the more certain, for those few years of hard discipline and pure unselfishness. Of that Cavanagh was certain; for, if Hugh were above all and through all an artist, he would find time for his work no matter what happened, and make opportunities, all the more precious because so rare.

He glanced at him as they paced side by side, and his face softened, and his eyes held something of the tenderness they

had held for Nancy. When they reached the farther end of the lake, he spoke.

"Then take it!" he said very quietly, speaking as though there had been no interval to their conversation; and though he did not look at him, he could feel the boy wince like a thoroughbred at the touch of a whip.

Hugh paused in his walk, and, flinging his cigarette away half smoked, faced his companion.

"You mean that?" he cried, and surprise and reproach rang in his voice. "I . . . I thought you understood!"

"I do," Cavanagh said, and met the startled eyes very kindly. "That is the reason for my answer!"

For a moment Hugh stared at him in amazement; then, with an impatient movement, turned away and flung himself on the grass. Cavanagh followed his example, and for a while neither of them spoke. Then Hugh burst out:

"But I don't understand. Why should I do it? I won't! I can't!"

Cavanagh paused a moment in filling his pipe, and looked at him. "Because it is your duty," he said.

"Duty? Duty? Nonsense! How can it be my duty? After all, it is Gifford's fault. He would insist on taking the whole responsibility of the family on his shoulders, when there were plenty of people willing to help. I don't see why I should sacrifice my art to his pride! And Gifford is as proud as the devil! You ought to know that!"

Cavanagh smiled slightly, finished filling his pipe, lit it, and began to smoke. Hugh watched him for a moment, then spoke impatiently:

"What is it?" Cavanagh asked; and the boy uttered an angry exclamation.

"Aren't you going to say anything else?"

Cavanagh raised his eyebrows, and met the angry brown eyes.

"There is no need, is there, if you feel like that about it?" he replied. "I've given you the advice you asked for. You are not bound to act upon it."

Hugh flushed; the indifference of the elder man's tone stung, and he lay without answering, pulling the grass and staring out over the golden sheet of water.

The evening was very peaceful; only the swallows made movement, and the crickets sound. Presently Cavanagh glanced at his companion, and something of the hardness went

out of his face, for Hugh's close-shut lips were trembling, and his eyes were blinded by tears. With a sudden tenderness in his eyes, he reached out his hand and laid it over the boy's.

"Your work is worth suffering for, old chap!" he said gently. "You'll be all the greater artist for this one day. It's not giving up; it's only waiting."

Hugh started at the touch, struggled to speak for a moment, then laid his head down on his arms on the grass, and was silent.

Cavanagh waited for a few moments, and after a moment or two Hugh sat up, tucked his handkerchief into his sleeve, and spoke roughly.

"Sorry I made a damned fool of myself!" he said. "You are quite right . . . and . . . and . . . thank you!"

Cavanagh looked at him, and dismissed the subject with a smile.

"That's all right! And now, old man, I think we ought to be betting back. I have a dim idea it is dressing-time."

Hugh looked at his watch, uttered a shout, and sprang to his feet.

"Good Heavens! it's ten past seven," he cried. "I'd better cut across the park; it's nearer, and the others will have gone long ago. Lady Duncombe was driving them over and back. What time is dinner? Eight-thirty, isn't it? All right, I won't be late. Good-bye!"

He went off at a long, swinging trot, and for a moment Cavanagh stood looking after him; then turned to retrace his steps towards the house.

"Good stuff there!" he muttered, half aloud. "Hullo, Gifford!"

Gifford was walking to meet him, smoking a disreputable briar, and looking very contented with life, and as he caught sight of Cavanagh a smile flashed over his face.

"Hullo! where in the world did you get to?" he inquired, thrusting his arm affectionately through his friend's. "You'll be late if you don't hurry. Couldn't find you anywhere, so we drove home and dressed, and I came back ahead of the others. What have you been doing?"

"Talking, smoking, and idling by the water, and I'm bitten all over with those confounded gnats. Look at that! I thought I was better seasoned!"

He hitched up his trouser-leg, and, pulling down his sock,

displayed an ankle covered with traces of the industrious gnat, at which Gifford laughed unsympathetically.

"Well, you silly old fool, fancy sitting down there and not expecting to be bitten!" he cried. "Come along now and dress. Never mind the ankle. Irritates? Well, of course it irritates! What did you think it would do? Play the piano? Oh, come along indoors, and hurry up?"

Three hours later, in the big drawing-room which was ablaze with lights and fragrant with flowers, Richard sat back in a low chair, and watched Evelyn Chetwynde as she played. Lady Duncombe's guests knew better than to talk when there was music going on, for she had a way of showing her displeasure very plainly if they did, so the room was wrapped in silence, while Evelyn played the first movement of the Schumann "Fantasia."

Richard had never heard it before, and its extraordinary beauty enthralled him. He sat absolutely motionless, his eyes never moving from Evelyn's face, and she felt his gaze and played just to him; and the exquisite closing bars were alive with a very vital tenderness, so that when they were ended she shrank a little from the chorus of praise and thanks which arose around her.

Richard Cavanagh rose and crossed the room to her side.

"Won't you let me take you out on the terrace?" he said. "It is so cool and quiet out there."

She turned to him with a smile.

"I should like it," she answered; and they went out together, passing through the big open window from the brilliant lights of the house to the velvet dusk and immense quietude of the summer night.

They passed along the terrace, talking but little, till they came to the stone balustrade beyond the line of the house-front, and there they both involuntarily came to a halt.

"How beautifully quiet it is!" Evelyn said, gazing over the stretch of park lying mistily before them, the lake one sheet of silver in the moonlight. "Look at the light on the water!"

Richard nodded.

"Yes," he answered, and turned to meet her eyes. "You have no idea how tremendously I am enjoying England," he said. "I feel like a schoolboy home for his first holidays. It's all so exciting, so immensely interesting. And it's so good to have met you!"

She smiled a little, raising amused eyes to his face.

"I return the compliment," she said. "I have wanted to meet you again ever since that night at Buckingham Palace. I want to ask you so many questions."

"I'll do my best to answer them," he replied. "Please begin!"

She made a gesture of protest.

"Ah! I'm afraid I can't catalogue them and start in a sensible manner. My longing for news is rather tremendous. I want to hear everything about Kultänn, about the place, the people, the work. Don't forget it is my birthplace, and the scene of my father's work!"

"I don't," he said. "Of course I realize that. To begin with, your father's memory is worshipped out there. The Ressaldar Ramadur Singh, who is the senior native officer——"

The delicate colour deepened eagerly in Evelyn's face; she interrupted him, smiling.

"Ah, tell me how he is!" she said. "He is one of my dearest memories."

"The Ressaldar? You?" Richard echoed, looking at her in surprise. "Why, I did not know——"

"Why should you? But it is true. And I was one of his biggest disappointments."

Richard leant forward.

"Why?" he asked eagerly.

"I was not a boy!" she retorted. "However, he was very good to me, and I think that, girl though I was, I almost cut my teeth on his sword-hilt. Tell me all about him. You are friends?"

Richard drew a little nearer to her, his face eager, his eyes alight.

"By Jove, yes!" he said. "He is one of the finest men I have met, and he has honoured me with his friendship. I don't think there is anyone out there whose good opinion I value more—certainly, whose affections I treasure more deeply."

Evelyn bent her head in assent.

"Both are worth having, I am sure. I am glad you are friends."

"He is a most gallant gentleman," Richard said quietly—"the finest type of a fine race."

He checked himself there rather abruptly, half vexed with himself for having spoken so openly, but the very real

interest in Evelyn's eyes as she turned to him reassured him.

"It is good to hear you speak so cordially," she said. "I love enthusiasm, and there is not much in the world nowadays."

He smiled.

"I'm afraid I was always rather a whole-hogger! As for enthusiasm—well, you've just got to have it out there, or life wouldn't be worth anything."

"I know," she said. "And I want to hear particularly about your work, now that I am satisfied the Ressaldar is well. I am afraid I am very ignorant about all matters of administration, other than military. But first, before I begin my cross-examination, won't you have a cigarette?"

"May I? Thank you!"

He broke off a moment to light it, then settled back more comfortably on the old stone bench where they sat, and prepared for a long talk. He realized that her interest was real, and that he need not fear he should bore her, and his diffidence in speaking of his work vanished; he felt extraordinarily at his ease with her, and absolutely certain of her sympathy. He smiled into her eyes as he spoke.

"Where and how shall I begin?" he said. "Give me a lead if you can."

She laughed.

"Very well. I'll do my best. Tell me first of local conditions. Is there peace?"

"Oh yes, of a kind. As a rule, the malcontents are not powerful enough to do much harm. Of course, right on the Border as we are, there is bound to be a good deal of unrest; the tribes try to settle down, but there are always a few unmanageable spirits who refuse to abide by law and order, and they raid—women-stealing, cattle-maiming, horse and carbine lifting—the usual round of things. Very often, too, it's against the wishes of their people; then, of course, we have to punish them, and after the village has suffered it settles down for a bit. We've a rotten old idiot now a few miles off, a man called Mujjian Das, and I know we shall have trouble with him before so very long. The majority of the people are quite willing, even anxious, to settle down and farm their land, and enjoy the benefits the Sirkar grants them, but there are always these turbulent fickle spirits, who work mischief to the whole lot. Of course, there is always

the danger of being caught napping, but then"—he smiled a little—"it's my business to keep awake."

"What staff have you?"

"The Revenue Assistant, Kinloch, and the Medical Officer, Scott."

"The rest entirely native?"

"Yes. Occasionally—very occasionally—I have a Woods and Forests man to report to me. That's all."

"All? That's a very small all, surely, for such a district!"

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"They don't believe in overstaffing the Border," he said dryly. "I report to my Commissioner twice a year, but the report is more formal than anything else, unless we have had trouble."

Evelyn nodded; she was intensely interested, and quite forgetful of time or place, only anxious to continue the conversation that absorbed her.

"The absolute government of the district is practically in your hands?" she said.

Richard rose from the bench and seated himself sideways on the stone balustrade, where he could look directly into her face.

"Practically, yes," he said. "I have to settle all disputes as to land, water, and grazing rights, oversee the control of the Irrigation Supply, keep all the conflicting elements in the different villages quiet, assess the amount of taxation for each little jaghir—landholding, you know—and the amount of the Government demand on the villages, and that is always altering, you see, if there is any flood or damage done. Then there is the collection of revenue and the hearing of all criminal cases, the inspection of schools, the punishment for raiding—and there's the devil to pay sometimes then, of course. I beg your pardon!"

Evelyn made a gesture that bade him not pause to apologize, and he went on:

"Then there is the sanitation, and that's heavy work. You see, the natives are fine enough, but they want looking after thoroughly, and Kinloch and I are it, so to speak. There's a good deal of the actual work that is done by subordinates, but everything has to be personally supervised afterwards by one of us. The register of births and deaths, for instance, is actually written up by a watchman under the head of each village, but he can't be trusted without

strict supervision, and, of course, the better friends you are with the head-man in question, the easier it is to get information that is accurate. Then there are Government grants to schools and dispensaries, and the smaller grants for the upkeep of shrines and the settlement of the harvest-returns; and if there is any sort of an epidemic, everything must stand aside for the work of isolation and quarantining of all infected districts."

"But the other work has to be done just the same?"

"Most certainly."

"Then, how do you manage?"

Richard smiled again, a delightful boyish smile.

"Oh, go to bed an hour or two later and get up an hour or two earlier!" he said. "You've no idea what a lot extra we can cram in when we are really put to it!"

"You don't notice the loneliness, I suppose?"

"I haven't any time to, as a rule. I've Kinloch and Scott, though certainly there are times when I should be glad of more companionship—just a change, you know; however, that's not often. But one thing that I do value immensely are home-letters. I expect everyone does that. Lady Duncombe is very good in writing to me. Somehow a woman has the knack of telling you so much more than a man."

Evelyn nodded.

"Yes, I know. And I know too what English letters mean!"

There was a moment's silence, then Richard flushed suddenly.

"I've been talking an awful lot about myself," he said rather hurriedly, "and I don't know why I should have inflicted all this upon you."

Evelyn lifted her fan from the balustrade, glanced at it, then spoke very quietly.

"Because of our friendship, I hope!" she said. "Surely you do not think I am anything but interested?"

Richard's face lit up suddenly with a very charming smile; he looked into her eyes with a frank affection in his own.

"Do you think I value it so lightly?" he said. "I was only afraid that I had been substituting my own affairs for those of Kultänn, and so boring you."

"Then please remember that you will never do that," she said. "I have a very great idea of real friendship, and anything connected with your work and your life out there is of deep interest to me."

He met her eyes with a sudden tenderness in his own.

"It is very good of you," he said; "I am more than grateful, and I assure you that I find the interest very welcome, perhaps partly because you seem to understand so well. It is not easy for me to talk to people, as a rule, about my work or myself, but you are different."

He paused a moment, then spoke rather low, his eyes on the misty stretch of park land.

"You are the first woman whose friendship I have ever wanted," he said; "and I do want yours, with all my heart. It seems so curious that we should have met five years ago, and never forgotten. You understood even then."

"Your work lay in my own country, you see," she said. "Somehow the North will always be that to me. I can never cease to love it, and to want to hear about it."

"I have taken a great deal of your time," he said. "Are you sure you do not grudge my selfishness its demand?"

She rose suddenly, glanced at him, then looked away over the moonlit garden.

"Ah, don't try to excuse yourself!" she said. "If you only knew how hungry I have been for some real news, you would not call it selfishness to talk to me of Kultänn! And your friendship will mean a great deal to me, too. It is a thing I have always envied men, a friendship that on both sides is sure and firm, that can be depended on, so that both can always be certain of each other's interest and sympathy and perhaps—help. Am I asking too much? If so, you must forgive me!"

She broke off, aware suddenly of how much she had said—aware, too, that she had spoken on impulse, and put herself in a somewhat strange position; and for a moment, when she had ceased speaking, he made no reply; then he stretched out his hand, and wrung hers in a grip that answered for him. For a moment they stood with hands close locked, then drew apart, and he spoke.

"You are very generous!" he said, and his voice had deepened and grown unconsciously tender. "I shall never forget what you have said, and if ever I become selfish, or too insistent in my claim upon you, try to be patient with me. I shall take full advantage of your words. This is no polite rejoinder; it is what I mean. . . . And now . . . I am going to ask a great favour. Will you please drop the 'Mister,' and call me by my Christian name?"

Just for one instant Evelyn hesitated, not because she wished to refuse, but because she was aware how very greatly she had taxed her own strength ; then she met his gaze.

" Will you do the same ? " she asked. " Let us be Evelyn and Richard to each other, as becomes two friends."

He bent his head in acknowledgment, and for a moment there was silence between them ; then, beginning to realize what an unconscionable time they had been away from the others, Evelyn roused herself from her thoughts.

" We must go back ! " she exclaimed ; " I did not realize how the time had gone. Cecile will be wondering what has become of us ! "

They walked back along the moonlit terrace in silence, and Evelyn was relieved to find that they had not been missed. She left Richard on the terrace, and went into the drawing-room alone, trying to fight down the extraordinary emotion that was seizing upon her. Here, in the brilliant flower-scented room, she could hardly believe the scene through which she had just passed real, and for the time she shrank from meeting Richard again in the full light, for she had broken through her customary reserve and spoken from the depths of her nature—to her a very hard matter. One thing comforted her. He, too, had done the same, and he had understood.

The evening came to an end at last, and as Hugh wished to walk, Sir George offered to drive Evelyn and Gifford in the car.

" I'll come with you if you don't mind," Richard said, overhearing the plans. " It's such a lovely night, and you have room for me, haven't you ? "

" Plenty. I'm delighted. Gifford, old chap, come in front with me ; I've hardly had a word with you all this evening."

" That was exactly what I wanted and didn't dare to hope for ! " Richard said, as the car glided away from the house. " I'm like a child with a new toy. Are you sure I shan't be a nuisance ? "

" Absolutely ! " Evelyn answered, smiling. " If you are "—and she laughed softly, a little laugh of pure happiness—" I will promise to tell you."

He laughed then, and they talked on indifferent matters all the way, and Evelyn, wrapped in a happiness greater than she had ever known, listened or answered like one in a dream, her eyes alternately on the beautiful country, and on the strong, handsome face of the man by her side.

As they came to a standstill at the door of the Chase, Richard handed Evelyn out, then, happening to raise his eyes, saw leaning out of one of the upper windows, a small night-gowned figure, and recognized Nancy.

In the moonlight, the child's pale, eager face, surrounded by the tangle of dark curls, looked strangely delicate and spiritual, and Richard was struck by the possibility of wonderful beauty it held. He smiled up at her, and lifted his hand in salutation, and Evelyn, seeing the gesture, followed his gaze.

"Nancy! Nancy! you'll catch cold!" she exclaimed. "Go back to bed at once, dear!"

Nancy drew back obediently, but her eyes were still on Richard's face, and with a strangely unchildlike gesture, she flung out her arms to him, apparently unconscious of any movement. He glanced at Evelyn.

"May I go and say good-night to her?" he said. "I won't be a moment. I think she has stayed awake on purpose."

Indulgent in her own happiness, Evelyn consented, and Richard ran upstairs to the door of the room where Nancy slept, and knocked.

It was instantly opened, and the child, slim and tall in her white nightgown, gave a sudden cry.

"Oh!" she said, and a wild rapturous adoration lit her face, "is it you? Really you?"

"Yes. Really me. I've just come to say good-night to you. Kiss me, kiddie dear!"

With a little strangled cry, she threw her arms round his neck and pressed her soft lips to his cheek.

"Oh, I wanted you so badly!" she said, her face hidden against his, "and, somehow, I just wondered if you would come back with Evelyn. Yes, I'll go to sleep now. Good-night. Good-night."

"We shall see each other to-morrow, you know," he said. "Good-night, kiddie dear. Sleep well."

He lifted her up, carried her across the room, and laid her down on her little white bed; then, turning away, went downstairs, with a tender little smile on his lips. Evelyn saw it, and smiled too.

"Was she expecting you?" she asked.

"No, but she had stayed awake on purpose to see you return. You didn't mind my going up, I hope?"

"Not in the least. She is very devoted to you, but I do not think you will ever find her a worry."

"I am sure I shall not," he rejoined; and at that moment Gifford came up to say good-night.

They shook hands, and Richard got in beside Sir George, then, leaning forward, gave Evelyn's hand one last warm clasp.

"Thank you for everything," he said. "Good-bye till to-morrow, and good-night—Evelyn!"

A strange thrill ran through her as she smiled and met his eyes.

"Good-night, Richard!" she said; and as she drew back the car moved away.

For a moment she stood still, watching it; then, as it turned out of the gates, she felt Gifford thrust his arm through hers.

"I'm so glad you have got to know Dick at last," he said. "He is the best chap in the whole world. Are you horribly tired? We passed the others on the road, so there will be no need to wait up for them long."

She turned to him with a bright smile.

"No, I'm hardly tired at all," she said, as they went indoors together. "And your friend is mine, Giff, and I am proud that it is so. I'll go straight upstairs now, I think. Ah! Here are the others arriving; I heard the gate clang."

She was right, for a minute later Diana and Hugh entered the hall, and as Gifford was going to his room a short while later, Hugh stopped him, glancing along the passage to see if they were alone.

"Gifford, can you spare me a moment?"

"Certainly. Come in and have a smoke."

Hugh followed him into the room, but he did not smoke; instead he stood very erect and still by the mantelpiece.

"I want to tell you that I will take that post you mentioned to me on Sunday, if it is still open," he said, speaking very formally. "Will you let me have all particulars about applying?"

Gifford's only sign of surprise was the momentary arresting of a lighted match halfway to his pipe; then he spoke.

"Very glad to hear it. I will tell you all about it in the morning. It is too late now. Had a good day?"

"Very, thank you."

"Cavanagh is dining her to-morrow night. Is that all you wanted to say to me?"

"Yes, everything. Sorry to have kept you. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Hugh went out of the door, closing it very carefully behind him, and Gifford put down his pipe unsmoked and looked after him, his face set and hard; not even Evelyn guessed how keenly he felt his inability to establish confidence between himself and his younger brother.

As for Hugh, his right-doing brought him no consolation, and he felt very bitter against Fate, though, oddly enough, in no way resentful towards the man whose advice he had followed; and he lay awake watching the early summer dawn creep into the sky, with a dull pain at his heart and a hopeless depression growing in his soul.

CHAPTER V

A DAY or two later Lady Duncombe gave a picnic, nominally for Renée, and from every point of view it was a complete success. Hugh was in wild spirits, and kept everyone in agonies of laughter, and Richard threw himself heart and soul into the task of amusing the children, and earned their undying admiration and gratitude. Guiltless of coat and waistcoat, with trousers rolled well above the knee, he waded in the brook with the boys and Nancy, helped Alec in a not very successful half-hour's fishing for minnows, built Nancy a fort in mid-stream, and garrisoned it with her against the combined attack of Hugh, Renée, and the two boys; finally played rounders and hide-and-seek, till even his energy gave way, and he came across the grass to where Evelyn was sitting in the shade, and flung himself down beside her.

"I'm done!" he exclaimed, and lay for a moment panting and laughing. "I should think I've lost pounds in weight! I've not played hide-and-seek for years. Oh, I am hot!"

He threw off his hat, and passed his handkerchief across his hot forehead, looking unusually boyish, with his hair roughened and curling crisply about his temples; and after a hasty apology, he took off his tie, pocketed a stud, and opened the collar of his tennis-shirt.

"Now I will gradually resume my normally solid state!" he said. "I'm afraid I must be growing fat, for I'm certainly short of breath. Lucky little beggars! A few bottles of

fizzy lemonade in their little insides doesn't seem to affect their wind in the least ! ”

Evelyn laughed.

“ Of course not ! Children of that age don't know they possess insides ! It's only peppery and ailing Anglo-Indians that have to consider them.”

“ I like that ! Why, English people are for ever taking cures. I believe they have diseases for the express purpose of getting rid of them. Homburg, Carlsbad, Wiesbaden ! I've heard more talk of them this week than you'd hear in India in a year ! ”

“ Well, you cannot say Gifford advocates cures. He is all for the knife at home.”

Richard gave a shout of laughter.

“ Good for Gifford ! English goods grown and consumed on the premises ! Still, thank goodness, he hasn't any crazes. He eats decently, and hasn't gone in for vegetarianism or any fad of that sort. I was half afraid he might have done, but he still eats steak, and doesn't call for a mess of pottage. By the way, what is a mess of pottage ? ”

“ I don't know. It sounds nasty,” Evelyn said doubtfully — “ sort of Biblical grape-nuts, don't you think ? ”

“ Grape-nuts ? I didn't know grapes had nuts.”

He paused a moment, threw his cigarette-end away, and, turning, lay so that he could face her, resting upon one elbow.

“ You'll write to me, won't you ? ” he said, with rather startling suddenness. “ Regularly ! Letters are so very welcome. And tell me all about yourself and all that goes on here. And Nancy. Dear little Nancy ! But perhaps she will write herself. You'll do it, Evelyn ? ”

Evelyn smiled down at him.

“ You ask as though it were a very hard thing to do,” she said. “ Yes, I will write.”

“ I'm glad. My letters won't be very interesting, I'm afraid, for there is no news except the news of one's work, but they will tell you that.”

“ That is just the news I want to hear,” she answered. “ And how you yourself are. When is your leave up ? ”

“ The 16th of October. How the times does fly ! It is less than three months from now, and it seems only the other day that I landed in England. I have been here three months and a week.”

“ Have you been home so long as that ? ” Evelyn moved

a little to shield her eyes from the glare of the sun. "It hardly seems possible. We shall miss you, Gifford and I. But I expect you will be glad to go."

He looked up at her with a sudden light in his eyes.

"Yes. It calls me. You've Frontier blood in you. You can understand. The scent of the Hills is in my blood, and, as Kipling says, I'd go back across all the world, if only to die there!"

"The smell of the leaves, and the damp earth, and the wood-smoke drifting through the pines. Yes"—her voice deepened and trembled a little—"yes . . . I know!"

For a moment or two she was silent, sweet eyes remote and dreaming; then, with a little start, she looked back at him and smiled. "It is in my blood too," she said. "I was ten when they sent me home. Old for India, you see, and a child's memories are apt to be interwoven with dreams; but I went back when I was eighteen for the last year of my father's command . . . and I want to go back again. I told you when we first met that I envied you your work out there. I think I still do."

He nodded, gazing out over the purpling heather of the common in front of them with absent eyes.

"There's the life and colour and the command. I'm afraid I'm a bit of a brute, but I like the sense of power. . . . So much depends on me. . . . What things I am confessing to you, Evelyn! I have never told anyone that!"

She looked at him with a smile in her eyes, but she did not answer in words, and he went on.

"There will be plenty of work when I get back, for in the autumn we are resettling the valley, and that will mean an increase of staff and a double increase of hours."

"Resettlement? What exactly does that mean?"

"General changes—money to begin with, for all the assessment has to be converted from Kabuli to British rupees; then there's a special preparation of all records to compile over again, record-of-rights, definition of tenure, pedigree-tables, and they can be the very devil—I beg your pardon, but they can— You see, all questions of inheritance depend on them, and you know what that means; you've enough knowledge of administration to realize that peace and quietness and many other things depend on them being correct. Then there are the Irrigation Customs, and last, but not least, all the cultivated land will have to be measured—accurately

measured—and maps made. That means that it can't be left solely to the native officers, but must be personally supervised. Lucky I got my leave just before it commenced—I shall be going back fit."

He ceased speaking a moment while he lit another cigarette, then added :

"Do you notice, Evelyn, that when we are together for any length of time our conversation invariably drifts back to the Frontier?"

"That is because it means so much to us both," she answered quickly; "I love it so, you see!"

He nodded.

"Yes," he said, and smiled up into her eyes, "I see."

And then, as if by mutual consent, a silence fell upon them. All around lay the wide expanse of common; above the sky was deeply blue, and the warm air was scented with the fragrance of the flowers, and its quietness only broken by the occasional distant sound of the children's laughter, and the faint hum of bees, hovering over the half-open heather.

A lark, high up in the heavens, came gradually nearer, and Evelyn found herself watching it with immense interest. It seemed as though there were nothing in the world quite so important for the moment as that little lark, and she watched it with a curious detached sense of unreality, as if, when it ceased its song and dropped to the heather, the extraordinary stunned feeling that had suddenly paralyzed her every nerve would give place to the realization of an utterly different order of things.

Nearer and nearer the lark swept, still singing rapturously, till, like a stone, it dropped into the purple heather, voice and flight ceasing at once, and Evelyn drew a long breath and closed her eyes, absorbed for the moment in exquisite pain; for at that instant she realized fully the meaning of the last words she had spoken, and all her phantom dreams of friendship faded.

True, the Frontier was in her blood, in her ancestry, in her life, but her love for it was caused, not by all that, deep as it was, but by something deeper still—by her love for the man who was working there.

By the blinding light of revelation she knew she had loved him from the very beginning, from that moment, years ago, when she had met him only to give a greeting and pass on, and that because of him all other men had been as nothing

to her. She opened her eyes after what seemed an eternity, hoping he had not looked at her, and was reassured at once ; for he was still gazing out across the heather, his head near her arm, the soft downward sweep of his grey felt sombrero hiding the upper part of his face. Beneath its soft wide brim she could see the curve of his strong jaw and chin, the splendid column of his throat above the open collar of the cricket-shirt, and catch a glimpse of the close-cut, crisply curling hair by the well-set ear. One of his hands rested on his thigh as he lay ; the other held the cigarette, and the back of the knuckles touched her arm. He had beautiful hands, strong and thin and nervous ; she had often noticed them before.

She wrenched her gaze away from him, and seized her courage ; she must not let him see any trace of emotion in her manner, or any sign of withdrawal in her intimacy, and so, hardly realizing the sense of what she said, she forced herself to speak.

"Isn't it getting very late ? Ah !"—a sudden relief swept into her voice—"here is Cecile !"

Never before had Lady Duncombe's advent been more welcome, and Evelyn turned eagerly to her as she came up with Diana and Hugh.

"Have you had a pleasant walk ? Are you not very hot !"

"Melted !" was Diana's brief reply, as she sank down in the heather ; and Cecile nodded in confirmation.

"We are ! But it doesn't matter ; it is too perfect a day for anything to matter. You are very lazy, you two. And now you will have to bestir yourselves, for we must be departing carriageward. Get up, Dickie !"

Richard groaned and obeyed, and Cecile drew her pretty brows together as she looked at Evelyn.

"You look dreadfully tired !" she said rather sharply. "Dick, give her your arm !"

It was impossible to show any distaste for Cecile's concern, and Evelyn, fighting blindly for self-control, was forced to meet Richard's anxious eyes calmly.

"Yes, you are pale," he said ; "I'm so sorry. It's this excessive heat. I shouldn't have kept you talking in it ; what a brute I am ! Please lean on me. I can't feel your arm at all at present."

Not feel ! When every pulse in her body was beating furiously, and every nerve quivering with the mere touch of

him ! Surely he would hear her heart beating and read all her soul in her eyes. . . . She bit her lip, and steeled herself to the ordeal, calling on all her pride to aid her.

At the top of the hill the carriages and motor were waiting, and she made an effort to go to the victoria, but Richard took the situation into his own hands.

"You are coming with me," he said. "Then I will look after you. And the air in your face will be refreshing. Now, Nancy, in you get !"

Nancy and Hugh got into the tonneau, the others of the party driving in the carriage ; and after a little, as they drove swiftly along, Evelyn began to regain something of her self-command, for Richard was a skilful driver, and he was so unfeignedly pleased at her company, so simply direct in his way of showing it, that she could not but feel quieted and soothed. The end came all too soon, and as they entered Yelverton Hall the butler handed him a telegram.

"It came an hour ago, sir," he said ; and with a hasty word of apology, Richard broke it open, glanced over the contents, frowned, said to the waiting man, "Bring me a Bradshaw, please," and turned to Cecile.

"Macintyre wants to see me to-night," he said ; "that means I shall have to catch the next train. It's a confounded nuisance. Ah, thank you."

The butler handed the Bradshaw, and glanced at Cecile.

"Tea is served, my lady," he said. "The next train is at five twenty-five, sir."

"Thanks, Andrews ; ask Wilson to pack my things at once."

"Yes, sir. Will you have the motor, sir ?"

"Please. Hang it all !" he went on, as he followed the others into the drawing-room, "I shan't see George, and it means I have only half an hour before I must start !"

Cecile began pouring out the tea, and Richard took a chair by Evelyn's side.

"Do be sorry for me !" he said. "I feel as though I were a small boy at a party, and my nurse had come for me an hour too early. And everyone has to wail with me !"

Evelyn took her teacup.

"Why, yes," she said, "I am really very sorry. No sugar, thank you. And you will be down again before you go ?"

Richard was handing cake to Nancy, and met her eyes fixed imploringly on his ; his words were for Evelyn, but his attention was for the child.

"Yes, I shall come down just to say good-bye, I hope. Probably late in this month or early in October. I must say I don't want to go to town to-night."

The talk went on, keeping to purely trivial matters, and Evelyn was relieved that there was no opportunity for any further conversation between them; only Nancy never spoke, but sat watching Richard with great tragic eyes. He was going away! Her hero! And he would only come back once more before he went right to the other side of the world. Perhaps for ever!

The child's every nerve was quivering with pain, and the future loomed dark and dreary; she was white to the lips as she followed the others out into the hall, when Andrews announced the arrival of the car. At the door, however, Richard caught sight of her face, and his eyes grew very tender; he broke off his conversation to Cecile as he stood pulling on his gloves, and turned to the child.

"Be brave, kiddie dear!" he said softly. "I shall come back to say good-bye. Kiss me."

She clung to him a moment, then smiled bravely up at him.

"I will be brave," she whispered. "Only come soon! Please do some soon!"

He patted her shoulder, smiled at her, then shook hands with the others, and got in the big car, took the wheel, and lifted his hat.

"Good-bye, Cecile. I've had a splendid time. Good-bye, Evelyn."

He let in the clutch, and the car moved slowly away from the door, gathering speed as it turned into the mile-long drive to the gates; and Lady Duncombe put her hand through Evelyn's arm, and stood watching till it was a mere speck in the distance, then turned to her companion with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"What a pity he had to go!" she said. "The dearest man on earth except George! Why he wants to live on that God-forsaken Frontier I can't think. Andrews, I shall want the dogcart in half an hour. The others can walk home, Evelyn, but I am going to drive you. You look so very tired."

It was certainly true, and Evelyn did not protest; she was tired, and unutterably depressed. Richard had gone so suddenly that she could hardly believe no longer than an hour ago they had been talking together . . . and as well, fear was gripping her; for if she felt this brief parting, what would

October mean? And, unlike Nancy, she could not show her grief.

Parliament was sitting very late, and London was not quite so deserted as usual, and as Richard drove to Berkeley Square he saw a number of people he knew. His appointment with Sir Henry Macintyre was for nine o'clock, and he had just comfortable time to reach home, dress, and dine before he need start. He had not wired his change of plans, and as his cab drove up he wondered whether he would find anyone at home. The old butler permitted himself a respectful "Glad to see you back, sir!" and Richard smiled, for the old man had been an excellent friend in the far-off days of endless scrapes and ravenous appetite.

"Is anyone at home, Walters? Her ladyship? I'll go straight up, then."

He ran upstairs, and found his sister-in-law writing letters. She looked up in amazement.

"My dear Richard! You! I had no idea you were coming till Monday, but I am delighted to see you."

"I had a wire from Macintyre about five," he answered. "So I caught the next train. I hope my arrival is not inconvenient?"

"My dear Richard, what a question! This is your home, and you have every right to come to it whenever you can. Frank and Betty are out; they motored down to Maidenhead to call on some friends this afternoon, and are not yet back. My only regret is that we are all dining out."

"So am I. I shall go to the Savoy late, and then go straight on to see Macintyre, so that's all right. Are you dining with the Farrens?"

"Yes. Will, the youngest son, is going into the Diplomatic Service, you know, and Frank will be able to do a good deal for him; besides, old Mr. Farren is a big landowner in Hampshire, and Frank is so interested in that part of the southern counties."

"I see. Well, I hope you will have a pleasant evening."

Richard was just completing his toilet, when there came a knock at his door, and Betty entered, clad in a close-fitting frock of white and silver, and looking very charming.

"I'm so glad to see you!" she exclaimed; "I only just heard that you had arrived. How are you, you dear old thing?"

She gave him a childish hug, and laughed off his warning for her frock.

"It won't hurt, and it's just lovely to have you back. Are you coming with us?"

"No. I have an important appointment, otherwise we would have gone to a theatre."

"I couldn't have come," Betty answered with a groan. "It's a political affair, and I hate the Farrens; they are the dullest people in town. Oh, I must fly. Ride with me in the morning."

"All right; eight-thirty sharp. Good-night."

She ran off, and Richard finished dressing, and went out, sincerely pitying poor Betty.

He got home that night earlier than he expected, and found that Betty had also just come in, and was more than ready to keep him company for half an hour or so, so they went into the drawing-room; she rang for coffee, and then settled herself comfortably in a big chair.

"I'm thirsty," she remarked; "I hope they will be quick. Oh, that appalling dinner! I thought it would never end. We sat for hours and hours! And no one said anything worth listening to, and my partner was deaf. Mother and daddy have gone on to Lady Esterberg's reception. Will you bring some coffee, please, Charles?"

Richard chuckled as he took a cigarette from his case.

"Poor child! It doesn't sound exciting. By the way, did you know the Duchess of Winchester was ill?"

"Yes. I'm not a bit sorry. She's been such an unutterable pig."

"Who to?"

"Miss Chetwynde. She offered to adopt her, you know, and Evelyn refused because of the children. I think it was just splendid of her. Isn't she lovely, Uncle Dick? I adore that stately, gracious beauty of hers. No, it's not exactly stately—that is too cold a word—but it is so wholly satisfying, somehow. Her skin, her wonderful dark brown eyes, that deep gold hair, her mouth, her figure, that low rich voice . . . even the grace of every movement . . . it's all thoroughbred throughout . . . perfect altogether. I could be content just to sit and watch her by the hour together, she is so lovely."

"My dear Betty, what a rhapsody!" he cried. "I had no idea you could be so enthusiastic."

"Yes, but don't you think the same?" Betty cried eagerly. "Don't you think she is beautiful? Don't you love that proud, delicate face and that perfect charm of manner?"

"For Heaven's sake, Betty, don't expect me to repeat all that! Yes, I'll quite agree that she is very beautiful, and that she is just as charming and good as she is lovely. There, I can't say more, can I?"

"No. You are a darling."

"I don't see the connection myself."

"You wouldn't. Well, the Duchess was furious. She told everyone that Evelyn Chetwynde was ungrateful and heartless, and she drew dreadful pictures of her future life and its drudgery. You've just met her. Do you think her dull life has aged and ruined her past recognition?"

An amused light danced in Richard's grey eyes; he laughed a little.

"Certainly not! She is one of the most perfect women I have ever met. I can understand it now."

"What can you understand?"

"Our friendship."

Betty gave him a quick, curious glance, but he was not looking at her, and did not see it, and so she went on.

"So, you see, I can't feel very sorry that the Duchess is very ill. She might have done so much for them all, and she has done nothing!"

Richard was silent; he was thinking of that long-ago evening at Buckingham Palace and that one radiant girl amidst the flowers and the lights and the gorgeous jewels. She had been perfectly fitted to fill that sphere of life, and she had given it up because of three motherless children. . . . Richard knew courage when he saw it, and a thrill of admiration for hers, quickened every pulse in his body.

The arrival of Lady Hilda and her husband from Lady Esterberg's reception effectually prevented any further conversation on the subject, but he thought over what Betty had said with a good deal of interest, before he slept that night.

As it happened, the business on which Sir Henry Macintyre had wished to see Richard was such that it would keep him in town for several days, so the following afternoon he made his way to Green Street to pay his long-promised call on Mrs. Norman Leighton. He was shown into the drawing-room, told that Mrs. Leighton would be down in a

minute, and, left alone, walked across to a mirror, glanced at himself up and down, twitched one corner of his coat, then, turning, glanced round the room.

Mrs. Leighton's drawing-room was characteristic of herself ; it had neither the severity of his sister-in-law's at the Berkeley Square House, nor the dainty comfort of Lady Duncombe's in South Audley Street. To the eyes of a man more accustomed to such things, the room was obviously that of a woman whose tastes was æsthetic, a trifle bizarre, and possibly none too healthy.

The chairs and lounges were very low and soft, the general tone of colouring was a dull old rose, and the pictures were chiefly of the modern French school ; the atmosphere of the room was enervating ; everything made for languid ease, and the warmth struck Richard a trifle unpleasantly. He was just wondering why the windows were not further open, when his hostess entered, and he forgot all about them.

She came forward, with a slow smile lighting her wonderful eyes, and her hands outstretched.

" Ah, I am so sorry to have kept you waiting," she said ; " but you must blame a tiresome old acquaintance who stayed with me for hours after luncheon, and would not realize that I had other engagements. Sit down near me so that we can talk—and please smoke."

Richard took the low chair she indicated, and she seated herself on a lounge half facing him, lit the cigarette he offered, and watched him through half-closed lids.

" So you are going back earlier, after all," she said. " What a pity it seems ! Were you obliged to go ? "

" It was rather impossible that I should refuse," he answered. " After all, it is only a fortnight earlier, and I want to get to work again."

" Ah, that is it. There is always the work, is there not ? How I envy you men ! When you are tired of this treadmill, you can just turn your back on it and go to the things that matter, the things and the life that you really love. It is only we who have to go on with it when we hate it. But, after all"—her voice changed—" I don't see why I should inflict my dismal outlook on life on you ! I have been suffering from a surfeit of political entertainments. Norman is Member for Ledbury, as you know, and I have been sacrificing my days to bear-leading his various friends. They were enough to

poison anyone's outlook. If one marries a politician, one must be bored and suffer in a good cause."

"And earn the crown of glory that awaits the martyr?" he asked, laughing. "It always seems to me that it must be such a consolation to think about that crown. Yours, I suppose, would take the form of No. 10, Downing Street?"

"You are sarcastic! The crown that awaits me reposes at present on the opposite side of the House. My similes, metaphors, or what you will, are a little mixed, but you doubtless understand the deep meaning beneath! Norman's politics are not mine."

Richard's eyes met hers.

"I am glad to hear it," he said, and she lifted her brows a trifle.

"You think he is wrong in his views?"

Richard's mouth set a little; for a moment he did not reply, then he said, very quietly:

"What Mr. Leighton thinks has nothing to do with me."

She shot him a questioning look under her lashes.

"And what I think—has that nothing to do with you either?"

He lifted his head with a gesture his friends knew well; his manner grew indescribably a little more remote.

"I should not be guilty of such an impertinence as to criticize your opinions." His voice changed. "So the bear-leading has bored you? Hard luck!"

She took her cue from him at once.

"Yes. It was rather dreadful. However, it's over, and I have the consciousness of virtue, which is rather comforting . . . and rare enough to give me a pleasurable emotion!"

"I should not have thought that anything ever bored you!" he said, leaning back and watching her with eyes wide and clear as a boy's. "You always give me the impression of enjoying life so keenly!"

"We women are taught to do that, you know. It's part of our creed never to show what we really feel. It's drummed into us all our childhood, all our girlhood, and by the time we are middle-aged we generally begin to understand and obey. You men are more fortunate. There, again, you have the best of it. And a man sets the pace, doesn't he?"

"I don't see why he should," Richard objected. "And surely Mr. Leighton does not expect you to live solely for his political ends?"

"Oh, he does not ; but, you see, he does not understand how there are things dearer to a woman than even the public good . . . at least, to some women ! "

"Yet it does not seem to me a hard thing to realize ! " he said.

She leant back against the cushions, a shadow creeping over her face.

"It is natural, I suppose, that his work should come first," she said, almost as though she had not heard his words. "But sometimes I wonder if it would . . . with me . . . if I were a man."

"It should not come first," Richard said, and something vibrated curiously in his voice. "He should think of his wife before everything."

She made a little gesture with her hands.

"How little you know of your sex ! " she said. "Yet you are ambitious. So is Norman. Do you blame him ? "

"Yes," Richard said bluntly, "I do."

She lifted her brows and laughed a little, suddenly amused.

"That is frank," she said. "But frankness is rare, so I forgive you. But surely you, of all men, see what a man's career means to him ! You wouldn't allow anyone to stand between yourself and your beloved Kultänn, for instance ! "

"I've not had to choose between my work and anyone's happiness."

"And if you had, I expect your career would win. You'd be like all the others. After all, a man's career means so much to him that he is perhaps hardly to blame if he fails to understand how much less it can mean to a woman . . . just because she loves him."

Richard felt a sudden unreasoning anger towards Norman Leighton, and over his handsome face came a look that sent a little thrill of delight through the woman opposite him.

"No, he cannot understand, but he should go down on his knees in gratitude," he said. "We are all very ready to forget how much we owe to women. Why do you let us be so selfish ? Why don't you bring us to our senses ? "

"We ?—Us ? " Mrs. Leighton smiled a little, watching him with amused eyes. "Do you class yourself with the ingrates, then ? Have you also treated a woman so ? "

The question brought a quick dull flush to his face.

"I . . . no . . . , " he said shortly, then laughed a little. "I'm not married, you see ! " he said.

"You evidently don't think very highly of marriage, then!" she said. "Do you know, I am rather surprised. I should have thought you would cherish all sorts of ideals: home, children . . . love in a cottage, perhaps. Ah, I am sorry. Surely you do not think I was in earnest? I was only jesting, and I am sorry."

She leant forward, and laid the tips of her fingers lightly on his arms, looking up into his eyes.

"Surely you don't take me seriously?" she said; "I was wrong to jest, perhaps, but you do not guess how strange it is to meet anyone who has an ideal left. Most of us do not meet a man till he has lost them all."

For a moment Richard did not answer; the touch of her fingers had set his pulses beating heavily, and something tightened in his throat. Almost before he had had time to realize his sensations she had drawn back, seemingly forgetful of his very presence.

The day was very cold and dull, and a wood-fire burnt in the hearth, its fitful light shimmering on the folds of the clinging satin gown she wore, that outlined her slender, graceful limbs with delicate distinctness; and as he looked at her he realized the extraordinary fascination of her presence. He was annoyed to find how the sight of her disturbed him, and he leant forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands lightly interlocked, trying to still the uneven beating of his pulses. Her voice startled him.

"I wonder why men always expect a woman to keep her standard so high while theirs is so low?" she said. "Do they ever guess, I wonder, how difficult it is? How wellnigh impossible . . . how heart-breaking?"

The sudden intensity of pain in her voice shocked Richard, and apparently startled herself, for she moved suddenly, and gave a nervous little laugh.

"I believe I am moralizing," she cried. "Why didn't you stop me, Mr. Cavanagh?"

Richard's eyes gleamed with a quick, hot light.

"Because I am interested; because I am sorry," he said.

"Sorry? Why?"

Her effort after light-heartedness, following on the momentary betrayal, seemed to him to be very pitiful; all his life he had been tender over suffering, and her tone, more than her words, had shown him a woman facing the world gallantly despite her pain. He spoke impetuously.

"It is not fair that you should suffer so!" he said; and, leaning forward, he looked into her eyes. "Can't I do anything to help?"

"—I beg your pardon, Violet. I thought you were alone."

Richard drew back sharply. Norman Leighton stood in the doorway, an odd little smile on his lips. His wife held out an indolent hand.

"Ah, Norman, come and sit down! Will you have some tea?"

"Thanks, if you will order it at once. How do you do, Mr. Cavanagh? I am delighted to meet you again."

Richard bowed and made some formal reply; an element of constraint had entered the room with Leighton, and Richard leant back in his chair with his lips close shut and the little frown between his brows. He was conscious that Leighton's personality was antagonistic to his own, and instinctively disliked and distrusted him. He was aware, too, that Leighton's entrance had been inopportune, and the knowledge irked him. He did not in the least realize his own danger, or the character of the woman with whom he was dealing. He disliked Leighton for his supposed treatment of his wife, as well as on purely personal grounds, but he did not in the slightest degree understand his own feeling for Violet Leighton. At present she was a woman, who by her endurance and pathetic helplessness called all his chivalry into play—no more—and Betty's remark had long ago been forgotten. Meanwhile Norman Leighton, tacitly ignoring his wife's invitation, had taken his stand upon the hearthrug, and was surveying her with a look on his face that angered Richard. Used as he was to a world where men were good lovers or haters, and frank in either emotion, the veiled suggestiveness of the elder man's glance was offensive to him.

The silence threatened to become marked, when Violet spoke.

"We are going to see 'The Cross Fire' to-night at the Imperial. Will you join us, Mr. Cavanagh?"

Leighton's steel-blue eyes shot a quick glance at Richard as he listened for his answer.

"I shall be very charmed to do so."

And when the arrangements for meeting were made, he spoke:

"I am afraid Mr. Cavanagh will be your sole escort, Violet."

"I came in to tell you that I have had a telephone message from a man I promised to meet, and I have to see him to-night."

Violet's shoulders lifted in a scarcely perceptible shrug, but she did not answer, and Richard rose to his feet.

"It will give me great pleasure to escort Mrs. Leighton," he said formally; "I am only sorry that you are prevented from being with us."

A faint smile flitted across Leighton's heavy features, and the smouldering dislike in Richard's brain suddenly flared up into active hatred. He had thrashed a man for less than the insult of that smile, and his hands clenched, and every muscle in his body stiffened under the heat of anger that ran through him. Leighton saw the hardening of mouth and jaw, the flame that leapt to the eyes, and knew he had scored a point, and met a man who would resent and suffer under subtleties that a nature less fine and clean would pass by without a sign.

He listened to his wife's farewell without taking his eyes from Richard's face, for here was a man primitive enough to treasure his honour, old-fashioned enough to be honest about his likes and dislikes, sensitive enough to smart under veiled thrusts . . . reading all this in the quick wit that had registered his smile as a deadly insult.

As for Richard himself, he walked back to Berkeley Square at top speed, angrier than he had been for many a long day, and deeply sorry for the woman who was tied to a man who treated her so.

On reaching his brother's house, he was told that no one was at home save Miss Betty, and, not finding her in the drawing-room, he went to the schoolroom at the back of the house, usually deserted now that she had emerged from its trammels. The evening was cloudy, and the room, shut in by tall buildings, was already half dark. At first he thought there was no one there; then a closer inspection revealed the forlorn spectacle of Betty crouched in a shabby arm-chair, her head buried in her arms, her face hidden.

He closed the door quietly, and went across to her side.

"Betty!" he said—"Betty! What's the matter?"

She raised a weary, flushed face from her arm; then, seeing who it was, held out her hands with a little sound, half sob; half cry; he took them in his, and sat down on the arm of her chair.

"What's wrong, dear?" he asked, concern in his voice and eyes. "What's up?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing . . . nothing . . . I'm glad you've come. Stay with me a little."

"Of course I will. I've been looking for you. But nothing, Betty? Are you sure?"

She moved uneasily under his scrutiny, and shook her head.

"No, no . . . oh, please, Uncle Richard, don't ask me any questions. I'm . . . I'm . . . only tired, and my head aches."

For a moment he scanned her face and his eyes grew grave. There was a look in it he had never seen before—a curious awakened expression, a sense as of fear and shocked dismay. Something had happened—that was evident; but evident, too, was her reluctance to give him her confidence; so, without further questioning, he drew her to lean against him.

"Well, I'm here, dear," he said cheerfully; "and if your head aches, you shall just rest here till it's better. Is that comfortable? That's right. When do we start for Scotland? Tuesday? How jolly! Now, there's one place where I particularly want to go, and I want you to take me. Let's plan it out now."

So he talked on till the dusk deepened into dark, and gradually Betty's answers grew more cheerful; and when at last the dressing-bell rang, she sat up and pushed back her rumpled hair.

"We must fly. I've to start at nine. Uncle Dick . . . dear Uncle Dick . . . some day, if you will let me, I am going to tell you about . . . to-night. Not now . . . and if ever I can do anything for you, I hope you will let me. . . . Good-night . . . and thank you."

Richard was vaguely disturbed by her manner; something was wrong, and it worried him all the time he was dressing, and did not leave him till he met Mrs. Leighton at her house, preparatory to going to the theatre.

"The Cross Fire" was quite a good play, and Richard was still too fresh to the joys of the theatre to grumble at any faults it might have had, and also, perhaps unfortunately, he was far too engrossed with the comedy to notice that his presence with Mrs. Leighton excited a good deal of comment.

Violet had presumably either forgotten or resolutely put

aside her unhappiness of the afternoon, and charmed Richard with her gaiety and brilliant comments on life in general, and was altogether care-free and living in the pleasure of the moment.

Afterwards they had supper together, and motored back to Green Street ; she asked him to come in, but he declined, so she told the man to drive him to Berkeley Square, and lingered a moment as she bid him farewell.

" This has been a night to remember," she said softly, as he took her hand in his. " It has been a very pleasant one, has it not ? And you won't come in ? Well, perhaps you are right. It is just as well ; we don't want our memories marred, do we ? Good-night, dear friend—good-night, and thank you. You have done me more good than you know, and I'm grateful. *Au revoir, mon ami ; come soon !* "

Richard's fingers tightened over hers ; he did not understand the effect she had upon him, but he felt immensely honoured by her confidence in him, and very tender over her helplessness. For the first time he was glad of his popularity, as he had often been glad of his strength, for perhaps it would be of some little good if he stood by, ready to help or serve her, and never counting the cost. He knew, too, that his help would be acceptable—nay, more, eagerly looked for and welcomed, and received, too, with gratitude. His chivalry was in arms ; his tenderness called forth ; and in such a character as his, no position could be fraught with greater danger.

A week later, still kept in town by the India Office, he received, among his letters, a small old-rose envelope, and from inside it a note, without any formal beginning, from Violet Leighton :

" I am in town for three days, seeing my oculist. Will you take pity on me and come this afternoon ? I shall be at home after four.—V. L."

He thrust it into his pocket, and four o'clock found him at Green Street.

Yes, Mrs. Leighton was expecting him ; would he walk upstairs ? And he followed the man up to the drawing-room hardly knowing what to expect. He stood a moment glancing round, for the room was in semi-darkness behind its down-drawn sun-blinds ; then Mrs. Leighton's voice showed him

where she was, reclining in a low chair, a bewilderingly charming figure in clinging sea-green, sea-blue draperies. He came across to her bringing a curious sense of virility and healthy outdoor life into the luxurious room. She held out both hands to him, but did not rise.

"Why, how concerned you look!" she cried. "Did you expect to find me stricken blind?"

He flushed a little under his tan, as he took the outstretched hands in his.

"I didn't know what to expect," he said; "you said in your note——"

"Why, yes, of course! I am imprisoned here in London, in this gorgeous weather, with a brute of a man pulling my eyes about. Are you not sorry for me?"

"Very. I didn't know your eyes troubled you. They look so very——" He broke off abruptly, and her laughter rippled across the silence.

"I hope you were going to say something nice. But really, you know, they quite hurt me at times, and this man doesn't want me to read much or go out a great deal in the strong light. I was so lonely that I ventured to encroach on your valuable time. I hope you have forgiven me?"

She laid the tips of her fingers on his arm for one brief moment, and felt him quiver beneath her touch; then, with unerring skill, did not give him time to realize his own sensations, but broke into irrelevant chatter. The extraordinary fascination her personality had for him made him quite oblivious of time, and it was after six when he arose, horrified at the lateness of the hour. She waved aside his apologies.

"Don't dare to say you regret having stayed so long! You have been most charitable. Don't you see that you have saved me from a very dull afternoon? It you weren't too bored, perhaps——"

She broke off, looking at him doubtfully, and the glamour of her eyes sent a sudden heat through him.

"You know I am never bored . . . here . . . with you," he said roughly; and a slow smile crept to her lips.

"I think that is true," she said. "Very well. Then come to-morrow afternoon, and continue your good deeds."

"I will come with the greatest pleasure," he answered, and stood looking at her for a moment with frowning brows.

"Do they hurt you?" he added. "Your eyes, I mean. I should hate them to hurt you."

Her inscrutable smile deepened, and she made a little gesture of dissent.

"No, they don't hurt," she said, "but they prevent me doing all the things I want to do. Till to-morrow, then. *Au revoir, mon ami.*"

The next afternoon found him again at Green Street, and Thursday also, and on the third day Mrs. Leighton welcomed him with just a hint of surprise in her manner.

"Do you know, I hardly expected you?" she said. "Yes, of course, you promised to come; and I knew too that you would keep your word if it lay in your power, but so many things might have happened to detain you. Pleasures and business, and that terrible India!"

He smiled and shook his head.

"You mustn't say that," he said; "it's my home."

She made a little grimace.

"Very likely, but to me it is terrible all the same. It is so far away. Oh, I'm afraid it was unwise to take the friendship you offered. I dread losing it so."

"You are not going to lose it," he said. "Why should you talk like that?"

A little breeze fluttered the leaves of a palm above their heads, and in the green dimness of the room he could not read her glance.

"Why should you?" he repeated, as she did not answer; and when she spoke it was with a vehemence that startled him.

"Don't you understand?" she said. "We have been such friends; you have been kind to me, and when you go there will be the sea between us. I hate the sea!"

He gazed at her down-drawn brows.

"Kind to you?" he said—"kind to you?"

"Yes. Oh, you think me so cowardly, but if you knew how I dread you going! I have leant on your strength, drawn on your chivalry, and when it is withdrawn I shall be so utterly alone! Forgive me! I oughtn't to talk like this, but sitting here and thinking—and suffering—is apt to make one a coward."

Richard stretched out his hand and took hers.

"I think you are one of the bravest women I know," he said a little hoarsely. "Don't talk like that . . . to me. You have honoured me with your confidence . . . you have let me be some little help to you. Can't I do more? Can't I

help to make things better in some greater way? I hate to go, knowing you feel like this."

A gleam entered her eyes, but in the cool green twilight he could not see it. She freed her hand from his and shook her head.

"There is no way, dear friend. I've made my bed and I must lie on it. Don't worry about me, I'm not worth it."

He leant back again in his chair, but still with his eyes on hers.

"It was a mistake. A horrible mistake! Can't you right it? Can't you lead your own life in your own way and be happy?"

"Why, no," she said very softly. "Don't you know yet, that the world never forgives a mistake? It is the one unpardonable thing!"

"But it is so unjust!" he exclaimed, with something of the warm-hearted indignation of a schoolboy. "So unjust and so brutal! Why should you suffer?"

She leant back with a gesture of exquisite weariness, letting her arms fall to her sides on the satin of the couch.

"Because I am a woman," she said; "just that."

And then it was that, for the first time in his life, Richard lost his head, and, swept away by the mad flood of desire such as he had never known before, caught her in his arms, and kissed her on the mouth, again and again, hot passionate kisses that wellnigh stifled her.

She could feel the tumultuous beating of his heart against her breast, and for the moment lay helpless in his arms, then the cool, quiet mind that dominated all else in her being, came to her rescue; she drew herself back from him, sank into a chair, and hid her face.

For a moment there was silence utter and complete and behind her hands her lips set and her eyes dilated. Had she repulsed him too quickly? Had she made a mistake? She trembled with excitement and fearful wonder, then barely caught back a sigh of relief, for he spoke, his voice throbbing with the passion she had schemed for weeks to rouse.

"Now you know the worst of me . . . all this talk of friendship is for me an utter pretence. . . . I love you. . . . I am willing to do anything in the world for you that I can . . . if you will come with me I can sail at once . . . I can take you right away. Where will you join me?"

For once a genuine thrill of admiration ran through her.

Here in truth was a lover to be proud of, a man who once aroused would sweep all before him, who would go forward on the path he had chosen, never looking backward nor counting the cost; fierce, strong primitive. She stole a glance at him and then, despite the admiration, a sudden fear shot through her. After all, this was not what she wanted, this furious headstrong passion that would carry her away on its flood . . . he was not a man to be trifled with; she realized that as she watched him standing by the hearth, his figure rigid, his face white and strained, only his eyes burning as though from some inward raging fire.

For a moment courage failed her, and she shrank from him.

"Don't! don't!" she said, and her voice shook. "Richard . . . don't look like that . . . you frighten me!"

She saw him tremble for a moment with the mighty restraint he put upon himself, then he came forward and his face softened:

"Forgive me!" he said, a little unsteadily; "I was a brute to frighten you so . . . only I lost my head . . . and we must arrange something, mustn't we? . . . I can't leave you . . . like this."

She put out her hands, laying them against his breast, her eyes on his.

"Dickie . . . Dickie . . . what are you asking me to do? Oh, I was wrong to let you kiss me . . . wrong to tell you anything . . . or let you see, only . . . only . . ." Her voice shook and for the moment she was silent, looking at him, measuring his strength; then she rose to her feet, and the whole expression of her face changed.

"I thought I could trust you!" she said. "Oh, Dickie . . . I thought I could trust you!"

He started back like a thoroughbred horse at the touch of the spur, and the tenderness and passion in his face went out like the flame of a lamp; his hands clenched for the moment on the back of a chair before him, then he spoke.

"I beg your pardon," he said hoarsely, "from the bottom of my heart I beg you to try to forgive me."

Then, before she could speak to stop him, he went out of the room, and a moment later she heard the street-door close behind him.

CHAPTER VI

RICHARD walked the length of Green Street like a man in a dream, not in the least knowing where he was going. His brain was reeling under the emotion and stress of the last few minutes, and he strode blindly on, taking no heed to his direction till he found himself well inside the park with the dusk beginning to fall. Then he threw himself into a chair and strove to regain some hold over his quivering nerves.

In all his varied life he had never before experienced anything like this, and, as he sat alone in the gathering twilight, every fibre of his being was shaken, every pulse throbbed feverishly; he was hot and shivering, rigid and trembling, by turns. All sense of balance seemed to have left him, and the very depths of his being were shaken and disturbed.

This, then, was love! This fiery burning torment, this rapture, this fierce desire. He laughed aloud, then shuddered, and right on the heels as it were of the laughter, his teeth gritted together at sudden rage at himself.

A policeman passed him and stopped a yard or two farther on, and Richard cursed the man beneath his breath, because he wanted to be completely alone. By-and-by, however, the man came back.

"Getting rather damp to sit there, sir," he suggested. "Nearly a quarter past eight."

Richard looked at him, with a blue glare of anger leaping to his eyes, but when the man passed on he got to his feet, startled back into the present, and the rage and passion and hot torment died for the time being in his soul, and he tried to review the position in which he stood.

He had fallen in love with a woman, that was plain, and the fact that that woman was another man's wife faded into insignificance for the moment beside that all-paramount knowledge. Norman Leighton had forfeited all right to consideration by his selfishness and his brutality . . . he shuddered as he remembered some of the things Mrs. Leighton had told him only yesterday.

He, Richard, was quite ready to take her forcibly away, to brave the storm of opprobrium his action would arouse, and if she loved him as he loved her, his shoulders were broad enough to take all the blame, and his strength great enough to

shield her from all unhappiness. He felt neither dismay nor shame ; he loved her, and she was suffering horribly . . . the solution was quite plain. In some things Richard was very primitive. He was apt to take the simplest and most direct way out of a difficulty, regardless of precedent or uproar, and in this most primitive of all things, his instinct ruled before his reason.

He had frightened her—for that he was sorry—and for the moment he had been repulsed and horror-stricken ; but that moment was past, and to-morrow he would see her again, to-morrow he would make her understand what he meant to do.

His thoughts were still extraordinarily disturbed, but now by joy rather than passion, and the walk to Berkeley Square in the hot night air, seemed the most delightful thing in the world. As he turned up Berkeley Street, lightning shone in the north, as though a blind in the sky had been swiftly raised and lowered, and before he had gone another ten yards, a flash glimmered higher up in the heavens, showing hard-edged clouds piled threateningly along the sky.

He stopped to light a cigarette, and a cabman, passing slowly by, called out to another as the hansoms drew alongside :

“ In for a night of it we are, matey ! See how old fireworks is going it yonder ? ”

Richard did not catch the reply, but he took the hint and quickened his pace, for it was evident to the most unobservant that the storm was coming up at a violent speed. Little puffs of hot wind buffeted down the streets, blowing dust and leaves into dancing spirals, then dropped as quickly as they had arisen ; there was a curious dry whispering in the trees, a breathlessness in the air, and the lightning in the northern sky was incessant.

As Richard entered the house, the first long, low peal of thunder rolled through the night sky, and as Andrews closed the door behind him, Betty came running downstairs with a cry of relief.

“ Oh, I’m so glad you have come in ! I was getting so scared about being alone. Do come to the smoking-room. There are shutters there and they can be closed. Father and mother won’t be returning till two or three, and I do so hate thunder ! ”

"Of course I'll come," he said. "Poor old lady; I'm sorry you were scared. Why are you all alone by yourself?"

She laughed.

"I'm all alone by myself because I had such a headache. It is only a thunder one, so you needn't worry; but oh, I am glad you have come back."

They went into Frank's smoking-room, and Richard settled himself in a low chair, then lifted his brows as Betty helped herself to a cigarette from the open case on his knee.

"Hullo, Betty! what do the Powers that be say about that?"

"Nothing; they don't know!" was Betty's airy response. "Cousin Jack taught me last year at Gelstie; we used to smoke on the moors very often."

"Very wrong of him. Mind your hair doesn't smell of it."

"I'll be careful. Oh, there is the thunder!"

She shivered as a long booming peal rolled out above their voices, and Richard patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"Suppose you tell me something I want to know," he said. "Tell me why you were so miserable that evening a little while ago. Do you remember?"

He had forgotten the incident, but something in Betty's attitude had brought the memory of it back, and he spoke on the spur of the moment. To his surprise he felt her shiver, then stiffen her muscles and sit upright, and, glancing at her face, he saw it had grown pale and set. When she spoke, her voice was strangely unlike itself.

"Yes, I remember," she said; "you were very kind to me that evening. You knew there was something wrong, but you did not insist on my telling you what it was. I was very grateful, and now, if you wish, I can tell you."

"If you will honour me with your confidence, I shall be pleased," he said; "but it shall be exactly as you wish."

She nodded, and for a moment was silent, then she spoke:

"Last autumn, before I was out really, you know, I met a man whom I liked immensely. It was at our house here; someone failed at the last moment and mother had me in to dinner. Well, after I came out I saw a good deal of him; he seemed to be awfully pleased at meeting me"—she gave a bitter little laugh that hurt her listener—"and I liked him more and more and admired him immensely. He seemed just my ideal, strong and charming and handsome. Mother was quite pleased about it, I knew that, though of course she never said anything about it . . . she is not that sort of

woman at all, you know . . . but still I knew, and there was nothing against it except my age . . . so it went on until . . .” she faltered a moment, then spoke more hurriedly : “ The evening before the day you found me he proposed and I accepted him, and that very night I overheard something not meant for me to hear. It wasn’t my fault ; I got wedged in between some people, and could neither get out nor stop my ears . . . and . . . and I heard him talking to a woman . . . a woman I know, and then I knew I had made a mistake. He was neither strong nor honourable, and so . . . I wrote to him to tell him what I had overheard, but saying I would do nothing till I had given him a chance to clear himself . . . so I met him without anyone knowing, in the Park, even though I did not see how he could possibly clear himself after what I had heard and seen ; yet I wanted to be quite fair, and he told me that he had quite broken off with this other woman ; she is married, you see. Oh, he told me such lots of things and begged and prayed me to forget. Forget ! Just as though one forgets by inclination, like walking downstairs. I think, perhaps, I could have forgiven him if he had been honest over it. He tried to get out of it, to throw the blame on the woman, and that was what made me finally see how utterly I had mistaken him. It was probably all true, she is all he said . . . and more . . . but that he should have said so to shield himself, that was the unpardonable thing. You hadn’t seen me since, you see, and I could hide it from mother and daddy, till after I had seen him, but you found me just after I had come in.”

With a sudden restless movement she got up and walked to the fireplace ; when she spoke next her face was hidden.

“ It was rather foolish of me to expect any modern man to be all I hoped, wasn’t it ? I shall know better in the future.”

Richard got up as though to go to her, checked himself, bit his lip, and stood regarding her doubtfully ; this was so unlike the girl he knew that for the moment he was at a loss ; she came to his rescue by speaking again herself :

“ It’s been rather boring for you, I’m afraid, listening to my youthful love-dreams. I hope I have got over them now and—— ”

Richard took two swift strides across to her.

“ Good heavens, Betty ! don’t talk like that ! ” he exclaimed roughly. “ It’s horrible.”

With a quick movement she swung round and faced him, her eyes dark and stormy, her face set.

"Isn't it true?" she cried fiercely. "You know it as well, better, than I do! People would laugh if they knew what I had hoped for and believed in! Laugh, and say it was the sentimental nonsense of a schoolgirl. You are a man, and you know I'm right. Do you wonder I was unhappy that night?"

Then, quite suddenly, the fierceness died out of her face and her lips quivered.

"Oh! it hurts," she said, hardly above her breath—"it hurts!"

"Betty! Poor little girl!"

At the words, she turned to him blindly, clutching his shoulders with agonized fingers, sobbing tearlessly against his breast, and for a little he did not speak, but held her closely, resting his cheek on her bent head, but after a while as the tearless sobs shook her from head to foot he grew anxious.

"Betty, dear," he said, "Betty, hush! You'll make yourself ill, little girl."

She raised her head at the last words, looking wildly into his face.

"If only I could," she said, "it is what I have been longing for, then I needn't go out and pretend to enjoy myself . . . oh, Uncle Richard, Uncle Richard . . . can't you do anything? Can't you help me?"

The cry went to Richard's heart.

He hated to see pain without trying to relieve it, and to think that it had so touched Betty was intolerable. He held her closely as though he would give her something of his strength.

"Darling, it's not true. Don't believe it. He's not worth breaking your heart over, but there are men who are all you want and dream of—I have met them, and I know—men who are honourable and straight living, men you may trust to the uttermost. My poor little Betty . . . poor little girl!"

He lifted his head a moment, gritting his teeth savagely together. "If only I could have five minutes alone with him!" he said below his breath, and then turned to her again, soothing her, with the tenderness of a woman in his voice and touch, till the cruel sobbing broke into merciful tears.

For once in her life the thunder ceased to trouble Betty, and Richard forgot even Mrs. Leighton, till, presently, Betty

lifted her head from his shoulder and rubbed her eyes frantically on such a very drenched handkerchief that he gave her his.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I've been an awful stupid, but you . . . you, you understood . . . and I feel better, I really do. I can't thank you, but if ever you are in trouble yourself, give me the chance of showing how grateful I am.

He smiled, and patted her shoulder.

"All right. And now, dear, you ought to go to bed, if you don't want the others to see you."

He went to the window, unbarred it, and leant out. The air was sweet and fresh, the stars shone brilliantly through the rain-washed air; he drew back again and turned to her.

"You may sleep well, the storm has passed," he said, "and remember, there are men fit to honour."

She laid her cheek against his for a moment in a mute caress, then nodded.

"I will remember," she said very softly, "for you are one of those."

And before he could answer she had gone.

Left alone, Richard filled and lit a pipe, then flung himself down in a low chair, and his own affairs swept back like a flood into his mind.

The elation he had felt but a few short hours ago had vanished utterly, leaving him a prey to an immense depression.

Looking backward, he saw clearly how ever since that first meeting in Lady Duncombe's drawing-room, he ought to have known how it would be. He had wished to help this woman he loved, and his help had been but an added burden; for the rest of his leave, if she would not go away with him before, he must try his utmost to shield her . . . the rest of his leave . . . God!

The Name was wrung from his lips aloud in sudden agony, for as in a flash he saw clearly what his love meant. To leave her as he had found her, suffering, lonely, tortured, and dishonoured by the man she had married, was surely intolerable. Had she not betrayed her own fear of it that very afternoon in speaking of his own departure? She could not be left so . . . yet would not her sense of duty, her splendid unselfishness, keep her beside her husband? Should he ever be able to make her see that it was not necessary to sacrifice herself? Ah, but she must see! Her womanhood was sacred, and sooner than see it defiled by such a man as Norman

Leighton, he would make any sacrifice, would enable her to get free, and then stand aside, if by that means he could insure her happiness and peace.

It was all very clear before him, for he was entirely honest in all he felt; he knew well enough, from other sources than Violet Leighton, that her husband was a blackguard and a moral leper, but he did not realize in the very least that his own wild Quixotic schemes were utterly unpractical, utterly impossible, and that the woman for whom he was planning salvation, was the very one who would never accede to them.

He felt suddenly tired and sick at heart, and, rising, he stood for a moment looking idly down at Frank's writing-table. So this was love . . . and it had come in this guise! His mouth set grimly, his face was very white under its tan; with a quick impatient gesture, as though to brush the whole matter aside, he roused himself from unprofitable thought, and went up to his room.

The following afternoon, as it chanced, Sir George Duncombe, passing through town, met at his club an old acquaintance, whom he had not seen for years, a certain Captain Mellishe, home from Kultänn on sick-leave, and, after a few preliminaries, the talk turned very naturally to Richard Cavanagh, and the soldier, knowing nothing of the friendship existing between his listener and the District Officer, spoke plainly and to the point.

"Best chap on the face of the earth," he said, blowing a cloud of smoke from his cigar. "Thousand pities he's wasted on the Political. He'd have made the deuce of a fine soldier . . . hear he's making a fool of himself over here, though. Pity. Most of his sort do some time or other."

Sir George pricked his ears, as it were, but spoke negligently:

"Why, what has he been doing?" he said, and Mellishe shrugged his shoulders.

"Hanging on the skirts of the Leighton woman. He's been trailing after her since the first fortnight after he landed."

"Indeed? Pity."

"Pity?" Mellishe lifted his lazy length half out of his chair and gave his opinion vigorously. "It's a damned sight more than a pity; it's a crying shame! He's one of those men who put women on pedestals and think 'em angels from heaven, and she's the sort who'll let him do it, and wipe her boots on him afterwards! Rotten to the core! And she's

hooked him ! I tell you he'll be broke, ruined, done for, and all for that little hell-cat ! Broke ! The finest man departmentally in India ! And what'll she care ? Not a rap, except to tell the story and gloat over him with the next man in ! And the devil of it is that nobody can stop him from walking into the snare she's spreading unless he sees it himself, and his sort never do until it's too late. He'd probably knock you down if you tried to warn him . . . just one of those quiet, pig-headed men with the fiend's own temper underneath ! ”

Sir George took his cigarette from his lips and regarded it critically.

“ Yes,” he said slowly, “ not the sort of man to interfere with, I understand.”

His thoughts were not pleasant ; he understood now the meaning of several stray remarks he had heard, and saw daylight in several dark places. There was nothing to be done either ; Mellishe's last remark had been quite true, Richard would stand no word of warning from even his closest friend, but would insist on going his own way, even if it led to ruin. Meanwhile Mellishe was speaking again.

“ He'll go to the devil, I suppose, like all the others have done. . . . Oh, it's damnable that a man like Cavanagh should be ruined by a woman like Violet Leighton.”

“ It is,” Sir George said, “ damnable ! ”

Mellishe threw away the stump of his cigar and sat up, staring in the fireplace, and clasping his hands loosely before him.

“ You'd understand better why I want to raise Cain, if you'd been out on the Frontier with him, as I have, and seen him pull a job through when half his men were down with cholera and the other half, ruffianly Waziris, on the edge of mutiny—or with a hundred devils from beyond Khyber yelling for his blood and not daring to move a step nearer to get it, because he was looking at 'em and holding 'em, with his face set like a flint and his eyes sparkling blue fire ! Oh, I've seen 'em and heard his Pathans talk . . . lying devils they are most of 'em, but they'd go through hell and out the other side for Cavanagh, and a man like that can be broke ! . . . Broke ! . . . by such a woman ! ”

Sir George nodded.

“ Why do you think she will break Richard Cavanagh ? ” he asked.

"Because she's just the sort of woman to do it, and he's off his guard. Did you know Branscomb of the Guards? or Skelton of the Engineers?"

"I knew Branscomb by name only. There was some trouble over him, wasn't there? I seem to have an idea that things went wrong . . . yes . . . I remember . . . the poor devil shot himself."

Mellishe snorted.

"Yes, he did, and that was Violet Leighton's work."

His companion started; he, personally, had always detested Mrs. Leighton, but they were obliged to constantly meet, and he had never had any particular reason for breaking off the acquaintanceship, but at such positive statements he was aghast. He was about to reply when, to his immense surprise, Norman Leighton himself entered the room, glanced round, and not noticing them, went out again. Sir George frowned.

"That's odd," he said, "I thought he was in Scotland."

"So did everyone else," Mellishe returned, getting up. "So did his wife. Oh, they are a pretty pair."

Sir George's ruddy face was unusually determined as he left the club, and he walked home at a great pace, wondering if he should catch his wife before she went out, for Cecile and he were going north and only expected to be in town till the following evening.

Cecile, after an arduous rush round, was resting, preparatory to dining at the Austrian Embassy, when her husband knocked at her door and then entered. She lifted her head from the nest of cushions and laid down her book with a smile that turned into a stare.

"Goodness me, George!" she cried, her high sweet voice ringing peremptorily. "What on earth is the matter? What has happened?"

Sir George sat down heavily on a chair by the couch.

"Nothing yet," he answered, going straight to the point. "Cecile, have you heard that Richard's name is being coupled with Mrs. Leighton's?"

"Heavens! yes, and I don't wonder. He is really behaving like a lunatic. But there is no harm in it. Violet's a flirt, but it will not be serious."

"I heard it first at the club to-day," he said, "and from a man stationed at Kultänn. Apparently everyone is waiting for the smash."

"Smash?" Cecile echoed, frowning. "What? how?"

He's being silly if such gossip is true, which I don't suppose . . . but it is not serious."

"Unfortunately it is. Quite serious. Dick doesn't flirt, and I realize now the truth of several things I have heard lately, things about Violet Leighton which I didn't believe. Cecile, if it is true, do you understand what it means? It will ruin Dick. Break him!"

"Ruin? Break?"

The frivolity died out of Cecile's face; she sat up and pushed aside the cushions, her eyes full of dismay.

"But she mustn't. She must be stopped. George, you are his friend; he loves you; can't you stop him? Can't you tell him what he's doing?"

"No," Sir George answered, rather grimly, "I'm afraid I can't."

Cecile banged the sofa-cushion.

"Then I will!" she said with great decision; "I'll speak to him at once. I shall make some excuse to the Embassy, and make him come here to dinner. . . ."

. . . "You can't!" her husband exclaimed. "Good heavens! Cecile, be reasonable. You can't tell him that he is being talked about, and is a bad little boy!"

She frowned desperately for a moment, then nodded.

"No," she said, "I suppose I can't, and the Embassy might dislike it . . . but somebody has got to do it. Violet Leighton is a cat . . . and yet nothing is known publicly enough to enable me to cut her. What's so bad is that he met her here in the first place!"

"I can only hope that we are disquieting ourselves for nothing. Anyhow, don't mention a word of it to anyone. I'll see you again later."

"Very well. Go away now, there's a dear, for I must dress . . . oh, and ring for Annette. Thank you."

She patted his arm as he passed her, and when he had left the room knitted her pretty brows and began walking up and down, every now and then stamping her foot or uttering impatient exclamations. She knew the gossip was true; all through the season she had heard it hinted at, but it had not occurred to her to take the matter seriously till her husband had insisted on her doing so. Now, every half-forgotten smile and innuendo flashed again into her memory, and she realized how near the brink of disaster the affair was.

It was nearer, even, than she thought.

The next morning a note in Violet Leighton's handwriting awaited Richard, and he tore it open with his pulses beating furiously. It was only one line, unsigned.

"Come and see me."

And he went. It was a cold, cheerless day and a wood fire had been lit and was burning cheerfully in the drawing-room, casting little flickers of dancing light on the rose-hued walls and the clinging rose dress that Violet Leighton wore. She rose to greet him, held out her hands and smiled.

"At last. How tired you look, Dick."

All Richard's doubts and fears, and all his resolutions, too, vanished like down before the wind, and at the sight of his face a tiny spark of triumph leapt into her eyes. She had got her way . . . this man was at her feet at last.

Sitting down on a great lounge near the fire, she patted the seat beside her, looking up at him with a mute invitation.

"Do you know you haven't spoken to me yet, Dickie?" she said.

He took a step forward, and his hands clenched.

"What do you want me to say?" he said hoarsely, "I can't talk trivialities."

With an entire abandon she lifted her arms very slowly, then let them drop to the couch and lie there, palm upwards, and her eyes, narrowing a little, lifted themselves to his. For one moment her gaze held him, then, just above her breath, she spoke:

"Say what is in your heart," she said; and at the words all his hard-won self-control vanished, and he flung himself at her side, catching her hands and leaning forward till her face was close to his.

"Violet . . . Violet . . . I love you . . . you understand . . . I love you, I . . ." he was stammering with excitement and the storm of emotion that was rising within him. "I've tried since Thursday when I knew, not to tell you . . . I've fought, and tried not to think of you, but it's been hopeless . . . I can't help it . . . I can't. . . . You are all the world to me . . . don't you understand? . . . can't you see?"

For a moment she did not reply. This she understood, this eager, passionate voice, this stammering speech . . . it was all familiar to her, dear to her heart, not because she loved him, but because it had humbled him, placed him at her feet, this man who had been so strong.

The flame leapt to her eyes, triumph rose high within her,

and at that very pinnacle of pride the truth struck home to her and brought her arrogant joy to the ground, for, as she looked into his eyes, a tremor ran through her—her pulses quickened, and the next moment the very foundations of her being were shaken by the desire that sprang to life. For it had come to this: meaning but to capture him as she had captured others, she found herself caught in the snare she had spread for him, and now, when the climax of her triumph was reached, her own self played traitor to her spirit, and put her at his mercy.

Since the realization of a situation may take less time than the twinkling of an eye, so the triumph and the knowledge of a thing she had never reckoned with or considered, a thing so vital that it could not now be disregarded—flashed across her brain in the brief moment in which he waited for her answer, searing it like a red-hot wire. She shivered a little and forced herself to speak.

“Dick . . . yes . . . yes, I know . . . but you must not—you must not.”

He caught her hands closer against him.

“Must not?” he said, and smiled into her eyes. “Why do you tell me that now? I love you. Do you think anything matters beside that?”

She drew back farther into the corner of the settee, staring at him, a curious flame alight in her eyes, her lips drawn back a little from her teeth.

“Yes . . . I know,” she said—her voice strangled—“I know. But you are going away . . . you forget . . .”

He threw back his head with a glad laugh.

“I am not going away from you; you are coming with me,” he said, “that makes all the difference.”

“Going with you? How can I?”

The laughter faded out of his eyes; his jaw hardened.

“Do you think I am going to leave you here, and perhaps never see you again?” he said—“leave you here, alone with that man, to be neglected and ill-used as he pleases? What sort of a man do you think I am, that I could do such a thing?”

The fierce determination that she dreaded was awakening once more, and she made a desperate effort to quiet it.

“I know you are the man who loves me,” she said, and, with an inarticulate exclamation, he caught her in his arms.

For the moment the future of which she feared to hear him speak was forgotten and he could only think of the present.

"Loves you?" he echoed hoarsely, "ah, how I love you!"

For one moment there was silence, while she fought blindly, madly, for the cool, quiet reason that had never deserted her before, but his arms were round her, his lips on hers, and she was helpless in the revelation of all his embraces awakened. Then she drew back sharply, putting her hands against his breast to keep him at arm's length.

"It is not yet, after all," she said, and in spite of herself her voice shook. "You have not to go quite yet. Ah, don't let us talk about the afterwards; let us be happy, just we two together; let us have just a few days when we may see each other and think of nothing but our love . . . don't ask me to be sensible . . . I can't be . . . all I ask of you now is to go . . . to go now . . . because I must have a little while alone . . . quite alone . . . before anyone comes . . . to think over all your dear words . . . until to-morrow . . . you will come to-morrow?"

"Whenever you want me," he said, and for a long moment he held her close in his arms, then, without another word, he left her.

In the dark little hall a footman inquired if he should call a cab and went to do so, with a smile on his lips that it was well for him Richard could not see.

Three days later Violet Leighton was forced to the conclusion that she had for once misjudged the man with whom she had to deal. Richard Cavanagh was strong where all others had been weak, and she found that their present intimacy would advance not one jot until it was ended by her either banishing him altogether, or actually leaving England with him. Her lover, in the usually accepted sense of the word, he would never be, and the day on which she realized this fact was one on which they were motoring back from Maidenhead. Richard spoke plainly:

"It's a bad business all round," he said, "but thank goodness it will soon be over, and I'll spend the rest of my life making you forget it. You will try to be brave, I know. It's the only thing we can do, in honour, you know, darling."

"What? What is it that you mean?" she asked rather feebly, for Richard's face was set. "If I leave with you, Norman will divorce me."

"I know. That's what I meant when I asked you to be brave, because, my dearest, don't you see there is no other way? I'll see the proceedings through as quickly as possible,

and I'll try to shelter you, but that must come . . . because we must be married before I take you away . . . don't you understand ? ”

A faint inkling of his meaning began to dawn in her brain ; she turned a little and faced him.

“ You mean . . . he shall divorce me . . . and his case against me will be founded on a false charge ? ” she said.

He met her gaze steadily.

“ Yes,” he said, “ just that.”

Then he leant forward, and for a moment took her hands in his.

“ That is why you must be brave,” he said very gently, “ but I will spend all the rest of my life making up for what you must suffer, and there is no other way.”

She turned her eyes away and gazed unanswering over the stretch of quiet country that bordered the Bath road, her teeth clenched, her lips set, trying to stifle the amazement and helpless fury that shook her.

Above all things she loved the social status she had as Norman Leighton's wife, and all that it stood for, and to jeopardize her future, to bear the storm of ignominy and gossip, to have her name dragged through the Divorce Court—at the mercy of the halfpenny Press ; to be shunned or pitied or laughed at, all for a false charge, because of the absurd notions of this man, who would not be her lover till he could give her his name, was preposterous, mad, insane !

And yet, strangely, contradictory as she knew it to be, never till this moment had he seemed so utterly desirable, and just for one moment some long-forgotten tenderness crept back to her heart. She knew Richard loved her with as fierce and primitive a passion as even she could wish for, and yet was strong enough to master himself, until in his own eyes his passion was no dishonour to her, and for that moment a wild desire that she could be all he thought her shook her soul. If only she had met him before those hideous years had been spent, if only he had crossed her path in the days when life was but just opening out . . . wife, mother, lover, she could have been all those once, and for such a man.

The car turned a corner sharply and the view of distant country was blotted out by high banks, and, with it, the yearning died out in her heart, leaving only the colossal selfishness of her nature and scorn for those brief seconds of longing.

With a little impatient movement she turned her head, conscious that she had been silent overlong.

"Yes, I understand," she said, "but oh, I don't know, I don't know. What if it is my duty to stay here?"

"Duty?" he echoed. "How can it be your duty? What good can it do anyone in this world that you should stay in torment? If he loved you, if he respected you, even, it would be different; then if you loved me or not you would have to stay, but as it is, don't you see it's impossible?"

"Yes," she said, "I suppose it is." Then she turned to face him. "Oh, let's talk of something else!" she cried. "Let us enjoy the rest of the drive. It is such a perfect day. Look at those cottages! What a picture!"

He followed her choice obediently, realizing that it was neither the time nor place to press his point, and they chatted of irrelevant matters till they reached Hyde Park Corner, where, at his own request, she set him down.

Amongst the letters awaiting him at his club was one addressed in a child's hand, a queer upright hand, with any amount of character in its odd scrawl. A smile dawned round his lips as he read, for it was from Nancy, four closely scribbled pages, telling of the doings at Pangle, with messages from the others, news of Sir Rupert de Lisle's progress, and some closing sentences that awoke a very great tenderness in his heart.

"I've often been dreadfully impatient and cross when I couldn't write and had to do lessons instead, and sometimes I've been rude and impertinent, but you told me to be brave, and Evelyn says that a really brave person means somebody who is brave right through and in the things that don't show, and it's not brave to grumble or be cross, is it? So I'm trying very hard, because you told me to, and I love you so. Will you always put it at the end of your letters? And I shall think I hear you saying it. Just like you did when you said good-bye. 'Be brave, kiddie dear, I'm coming back,' just like that, and I will be, oh, I will. Good-bye, and God bless you.

"Your loving
"NANCY."

Richard bit his lip and stood for a moment with the letter in his hand, for the brave childish soul revealed in those

blotted lines was very dear to him, and he knew that presently the loyal little heart might be dealt a blow from which recovery would be very hard. He was surprised to find how much the thought of it hurt him, and with the thought of Nancy came that of Evelyn. What would she think when she should hear what he had done? Still holding Nancy's letter, he went into the smoking-room, and, finding it almost empty, he flung himself into a low chair close by the window and stared out. His future was not a very alluring one, and, even though he loved the woman for whom he must give up so much with all the passion of his nature, he did not pretend even to himself that he would not suffer by this love and through it, very greatly. The most he could hope for would be that Norman Leighton would have the case heard *in camera*, and so save the hateful publicity of the Press.

In Piccadilly he met Gifford Chetwynde, who welcomed him gladly.

"Hullo, old chap!" he said as they shook hands, "I was just wondering how to get at you. I'm going down to Pangley to-morrow for the Sunday. Will you come with me? It's your last chance of saying good-bye to them, isn't it? When do you sail?"

"Saturday next. Thanks, I shall be very glad to come," Richard answered. "By Jove! how this leave has flown!" Gifford nodded.

"It's been so good having you at home all this summer," he said—"like old times."

A singularly sweet smile flashed over Richard's face.

"It's been just as good to me," he said. "That's the worst part of it. Five years is a long time in which to lose sight of everybody. Five years!"

Something in his tone made Gifford look at him sharply.

"It's not a lifetime," he said, and Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"No—no, of course not. Well, I must be off. It's very good of you to ask me to Pangley, and so, if you don't telephone before twelve, I shall meet you at the station at three. All right, good-bye till then."

They shook hands, and Gifford went his way, with frowning brows and worried eyes, for he was quite sure that something unusual was influencing his friend.

As for Richard, he was already beginning to suffer for the love that had come to him, for everything tended to the

one end—namely, that of showing him all he would lose, and yet, as he had told Violet Leighton only a little while ago, he could find no other way.

Richard possessed one faculty for which few people gave him credit, that of a very powerful and vivid imagination, generally kept sternly in check, but occasionally capable of violent revolt against his will. It was this that was beginning to trouble him, for it enabled him to picture, with unnecessary plainness, every detail of the life awaiting him. His friends would be incredulous at first, then amazed, then horrified; his work would suffer; he would have to resign, and a stab of pain, so keen that it turned him for the moment almost physically sick, darted through him, as he realized what that meant. The Frontier was so utterly a part of himself that he dared not picture life without it. Yet against all this was Violet Leighton, for whom he was ready to give up everything, and she came first.

He felt tired out when he went to bed, but found it utterly impossible to get to sleep. His bodily health was so superb that that alone was sufficient to make him wretched, and he tossed and turned for hours, trying to sweep his brain clear of all the tormenting thoughts that maddened it, and not in the least succeeding. At last, in sheer desperation, he forced himself to lie still and turn his thoughts from the future to the more immediate present.

It was a very rough night, for the wind had risen and brought rain in its train, and now the sleet dashed itself furiously against the window, and the wind wailed dismally one moment and blew in roaring gusts the next. A gas-lamp in the Square, just opposite his window, made an effort to shed a little light amidst the surrounding dreariness, but the lower branches of the trees tossed themselves to and fro in front of it, causing the light to waver and dance uncertainly all over the room.

Richard lay and listened to the rain sluicing against the glass and the wind blowing gustily against the house, and roaring amidst the tossing trees in the Square, and as he listened to it, he wondered what Pangley would look like on the morrow after such a night of storm.

At last he dozed off into a troubled sleep, and dreamed that he had gone to India with Mrs. Leighton, and that on the way she had changed into his sister-in-law, who told him Evelyn was dead; and he woke with a great start, to find himself in a cold sweat, and trembling from head to foot.

He was immensely thankful to see the familiar surroundings of his own room, but, even then, the dream remained, for it had been singularly vivid, and he lay gazing at the grey square of the window outlined against the darkness of the walls. It was taking all his courage to face the future with anything like equanimity in the early dawn of this autumn morning, and he could not but wonder what Evelyn would think of him, whether the friendship that he treasured so greatly would stand the strain that would so soon be put upon it. Slowly, very slowly, the square of the window, scarcely grey at first, grew imperceptibly more distinct, till the trees in the Square gardens were visible against the sky, and presently Richard got out of bed, and, crossing the room, looked out.

The clouds had passed with the dying down of the gale, and immediately above, the sky was of that wonderful pearly hue that precedes the dawn-rise, and a few pale stars lingered here and there, as though loath to veil themselves till the night should come again. The east he could not see, but away to the west the heavens were still deeply, tenderly blue, with the blue of the earliest dawn, while the air was very fresh, with that crispness that heralds autumn. Richard stood leaning his head against the jamb of the window, gazing into the wonderful purity of the heavens. He could not quite define, even to himself, the reason for his great unhappiness, but, standing there, he felt for the first time in his life utterly alone in soul, and remote from all the world. Behind him lay years of hard work, danger and splendid achievement; before him, only a great desolation. He realized that his work could no longer be the breath of his life; his name would have a stain upon it, and the Border was not served by such men. He shut his eyes and clenched his hands, and as he stood there, heedless of the cold, wearied by his night of ceaseless mental struggle, he longed for a moment desperately for someone to speak to, for a mere human presence and human sympathy. His own words rang in his ears, "There is no other way . . . no other way . . ." and he knew that that was equally true with regard to the other matter. He could not part from the woman he loved, and the natural corollary was, that his work on the Frontier was over.

The sky grew lighter and lighter as the sun neared the horizon, and the west lost its hue of velvet-blue darkness, which faded to a delicate turquoise, while the last stars grew dim, and the tops of the trees were suddenly flushed with gold.

Then at last Richard turned from the window and flung himself down again on the bed, utterly weary and sick at heart.

Betty was indulging in a late breakfast for once in her life, and exclaimed with surprise, when Richard entered the dining-room :

"Uncle Dick ! You ! What is the matter ? "

"Nothing. Why ? I didn't sleep well," he answered ; and Betty, lifting her eyebrows in polite disbelief, poured him out a cup of strong coffee.

"Come for a ride with me ? " she suggested. "Sleeplessness is not a complaint of yours as a rule, is it ? The open air is the best thing. I expect you have been indoors too much. Oh, by the way, the Duchess of Winchester is dead. I hope she has left Evelyn Chetwynde something. She ought to have done so, if only to make up for being such a brute."

Richard nodded. He saw that Betty was only chattering on purpose to save him the necessity of talking, and he was grateful.

"I hope so," he said, in reply to her last remark. "By the way, Betty, I am going down to Pangley with Gifford Chetwynde this afternoon for a few days—till Monday, in fact."

"Are you ? I am so sorry, for we are going to Gorton to-morrow, so I'm afraid I shan't see you again before you go back. Oh, Uncle Richard, I do wish you needn't go back to India ! I know it's wrong of me, but I do so hate India for taking you away ! Of course, I know how you love it, and that you couldn't live without it, but . . ."

Richard's face set like a mask, and Betty broke off abruptly. For a moment she looked at him ; then she bent forward and spoke very quietly.

"Uncle Richard ! " she said, "there is something wrong. Will you not tell me what it is ? "

She trembled a little at her own daring, then, stretching out her hand across the table, laid it on his.

"I don't want to intrude," she said ; "but you promised ! "

Richard's eyes met hers, unutterable dreariness in their depths.

"I can't, Betty," he said, very gently—"I can't, and I don't think I'll ride with you. I'm not very good company this morning. You can't help me in any way, dear, or I would tell you. Don't worry ; I'm quite all right."

He smiled across at her, and Betty, seeing the inflexible

decision behind the smile, gave up the attempt, and, a message being brought that the horses were round, she left him.

Richard finished his breakfast and retired to the smoking-room to answer letters, and about eleven o'clock Betty returned.

"I've come to say good-bye," she said, "because I am lunching out, and you will be gone when I return. How quickly the time has flown! It seems only a week or two since that April day when I rushed in and found you waiting here. Mother will be in in a moment, but I wanted to see you alone first. You have been very kind to me, Uncle Richard. I shall not forget the other night."

He pushed back his chair and came over to her side.

"Don't forget what I told you, either," he said; "don't be satisfied with the second best. Grow up as dear a woman as you are a girl, keep your nature unchanged and your brave outlook on life. I don't want to think you will change."

She was silent for a moment, then looked up at him.

"I will try to be what you want," she said. "Good-bye, Uncle Richard . . . good luck always . . . and, oh, come back safely!"

Her voice shook, and the tears sprang to her eyes, but she blinked them bravely away as he took her hands in his.

"Good-bye, little girl," he said; "I've been very happy this summer. Don't forget me . . . good-bye."

For a moment he looked into her eyes with a look she did not understand, then he bent and kissed her. The next moment Lady Hilda came into the room.

"I am so very sorry that we shall not see you again," she said, holding out her hand; "but I did not know you were going to Pangle. It has been very good to have you home again, Richard. I hope the next time may be happier still, if that be possible. My very best wishes for your splendid work and yourself—now and always!"

The warmth of her gracious little speech surprised Richard, for he knew his sister-in-law would never say a word she did not mean, and he felt now that he had been a little unjust in feeling that the antagonism of his boyhood still existed between them.

"It is very good of you. I am very grateful," he said jerkily. "It has been splendid being home again. Good-bye, Hilda . . . and thank you."

They shook hands, and Betty kissed him again; then the

door closed behind them, and they passed out of his life, for he knew Hilda would never forgive him for the disgrace that he was about to bring upon his name.

CHAPTER VII

DESPITE the greyness of the morning, the afternoon was one of exceeding beauty, and Richard and Gifford walked from Pangley Station to the Chase, enjoying the dreamy warmth of the day, Richard trying to prevent his thoughts from dwelling on the trouble that was to come, for, above all things, he did not desire that Gifford should think there was anything amiss. When they reached the Chase, Nancy was sitting on the top bar of the white gates, waiting for them, and she descended with a shriek of joy, and hurled herself into Richard's arms.

"You've come!" she cried. "Oh, how lovely!" She raised a radiant face to his, wild excitement in her dark eyes. "I could hardly believe it last night when Evelyn told me. Oh, I've such heaps to tell you about Rupert, too. Did you get my letter? I wrote you ever such a long one!"

"Yes, I received it all right," he answered, and, with his arm round her shoulders, began to walk slowly up the drive. "I very much want to hear all about the book, and if Sir Rupert is going to France or not. How are lessons going, too?"

She leant her curly head against him, and, taking his hand from where it rested on her shoulder, drew it to her lips and kissed each finger separately.

"I'm trying very hard," she said, very low, "and I will go on—I really will. Oh, it's so lovely to have you here again! Will you come up and say good-night like you did when you came back from Yelverton that night?"

"Yes, if Evelyn will let me. Where is she?"

"She is indoors, and tea is ready. Come in."

Gifford went up to his room, but Richard followed Nancy into the low, sunny drawing room, and there found Evelyn. She had heard their voices, and, as they entered, came across the room, her hands outstretched.

"How do you do? I'm so glad to see you again."

He shook hands, a smile replacing the gloom of his eyes.

"I'm very fit," he answered. "I hope my coming was not very inconvenient, was it?"

"Inconvenient? Of course not! Ah, Gifford! How are you, dear?" She turned to greet her brother, scanning his face with anxious tenderness, then rang for tea to be brought in, and chatted of irrelevant matters till all was ready.

"Sugar? Milk or cream?" she said, as she began to pour out. "I always forget, Richard; I'm so sorry! How are Cecile and Sir George? Did you leave them well?"

"Milk and sugar, please. Yes, both Sir George and Lady Duncombe were flourishing when I left them. My people go north to-morrow, so if you hadn't come to my rescue I should have been alone in my glory—and that has a way of being trying."

"You have no need to be alone," Gifford said lazily, leaning back in his chair and grinning across at his friend. "You have no idea what a very big lion you are, have you, Dick? He roars quite loudly at times, Evelyn."

Evelyn looked across at Richard.

"Do you? How tiresome for you! It must be so annoying to roar, especially if you've a headache. Don't do it here."

"I shall begin promptly!" he retorted. "The more particularly because Gifford has all the cakes close to him, and is fixing a greedy eye on the sandwiches. Don't be such a disgusting glutton, Gifford!"

When tea was over, Gifford announced his intention of going for a walk, and looked questioningly at Richard; but the latter shook his head.

"To-morrow. I'm lazy now. Stay and smoke, and don't be so beastly energetic!"

"Or go on the river," Evelyn suggested. "It's only a very little way to walk, and it will be lovely now."

"I really think the river is an excellent idea—for to-morrow," Gifford said; "but if I can't do as I want, and no one will come with me, I won't do as anyone wants. I'll just stay at home and be a nuisance. That's what you have let yourself in for, Evelyn. Let's go and play tennis."

So a sett was made up; Nancy, to her intense satisfaction, playing with Richard against her brother and sister, while Hilary made himself useful, picking up balls at a halfpenny

a dozen. Nancy's fleetness and agility made her quite a formidable opponent, despite her years, and Richard, though out of practice, did not play a bad game, so, when they had each won a sett, and were playing the third, excitement ran high. Both Evelyn and Gifford were fine players, but Richard was steady, and Nancy this evening was absolutely brilliant. The sun had set before the last game began, and the light was growing uncertain, when a particularly vicious serve from Gifford sent Nancy flying up to the net, and back again to the extreme limit of the court, and Richard, misjudging his distance in the fast-gathering dusk, ran forward for the return ball, just as Nancy did the same. The ball descended between them, and both tried to take it, the result being a violent collision, and the ignominious spectacle of Richard rolling over on the grass, knocked off his balance in his effort to avoid Nancy, who tripped over his prostrate body and sat down accurately on his stomach.

Hilary's voice rang out in a shout, and Gifford leaped the net and came to the rescue, followed more slowly by Evelyn, both of them struggling between expressions of sympathy and irresistible peals of laughter. Nancy scrambled up, and Richard rolled over, gasping feebly, while Gifford sat down on the grass and shouted with laughter.

"Oh, oh! I'm so awfully sorry! I couldn't help it. But we have lost the sett—we've lost the sett!" Nancy wailed; and Gifford collapsed afresh.

"I'll give you the sett with pleasure for the sake of seeing old Dick go over like that," he cried. "Oh, I ache—I ache!"

"So do I!" Richard groaned, sitting up and casting a wrathful eye on his helpless friend. "Nancy! Nancy! you've knocked out of me every bit of breath I ever had! You sat absolutely in my wind! Oh! oh!"

Nancy flopped down on the grass at his side.

"Have I really hurt you?" she cried anxiously. "Please do tell me! I didn't mean to! I really didn't!"

Richard clutched himself round the middle, and straightened himself with great care.

"Not past hope!" he said. "No, of course not! Don't worry, kiddie, it's all right. But we'll have our revenge on them, won't we, Nancy—only no more playing in the twilight for me!"

"You're all green behind!" Gifford said, with malicious enjoyment, as they walked back to the house. "The grass

must have been damp. You'll think of this when you are once more a person of dignity and importance at Kultänn, won't you?"

Richard's muscles stiffened, his hand resting lightly on Gifford's arm clenched.

"Yes," he said, with a sudden constraint in his tone, "yes . . . I shall think of it."

"It is dressing-time," Evelyn said, hearing the change in his voice, and wondering at it. "Bedtime, too, Nancy. Run, dear!"

The child bid the others good-night, and obeyed, and Evelyn accompanied Richard slowly upstairs, chatting of the game. At her room-door she paused, her eyes searching his.

"Richard," she said, sudden concern in her own, "there is nothing wrong, is there? You don't look very fit. Are you tired?"

"A little," he answered evasively. "No, there is nothing wrong. Of course not. Good-bye till dinner."

He smiled as he passed on, but the smile did not reassure her, and as she went into her own room Diana waylaid her, speaking abruptly.

"Evelyn," she said, "what's wrong with Mr. Cavanagh?"

Evelyn's fingers tightened on the banister-rail.

"I did not know that there was anything wrong," she said, after a scarcely perceptible pause.

"Yes there is," Diana said quickly. "I'm certain of it, and I wondered if you knew what it was."

"I know nothing about it. What makes you think so? I know nothing of anything that could be amiss."

Diana swung round rather violently.

"Then find out!" she said. "Find out as quickly as you can. Make him tell you. You are his friend, and it ought to be easy for you."

"Diana! What do you mean?"

Evelyn's eyes met her cousin's with amazement in their depths, and Diana uttered an impatient little sound of scorn.

"What I say! I'm not mad! But I tell you that man is in trouble—serious trouble, and it's going to be bad for him. Have you noticed how different he is from what he was when he was at Yelverton? Then he was just like a boy on a holiday, and without a care in the world. This evening he has listened to your playing with his face set like a flint, and his eyes stern, and gloomy, and hard. Oh, I'm not imagining

a lot of sentimental nonsense, or investing him with interesting troubles to satisfy my romantic notions. I'm talking hard common sense. He's on the edge of a big smash-up of some kind or another. You are his friend—so is Gifford, for that matter, but a man can't do these things—save him from it.”

Her voice vibrated through the stillness; her eyes flashed stormily; she was immensely in earnest, for, with all her heart, she liked and admired Richard Cavanagh.

Evelyn was silent for a moment, instinctively feeling Diana's amazing words were true; then, rallying her self-control, she turned to her cousin.

“I will do what I can,” she said quietly. “I hope you may be wrong.” And without further comment passed into her own room.

All through a troubled and nearly sleepless night Diana's words throbbed through Evelyn's brain, and she rose with the fear still clutching at her heart, but before the morning was over, it was dispelled, for Richard greeted her with no sign of trouble in his eyes or smile, and was as cheerfully irresponsible all the long sunny morning as Hugh himself.

The afternoon was spent in the garden, Hugh and Diana arguing on all sorts of absurd and amazing subjects, Richard talking very little, but lounging in a low chair, and occasionally hurling a remark at Hugh's head, while Nancy lay under the trees near by, alternately working with feverish energy and gazing at Richard's profile with adoring eyes.

Presently Richard drew his chair nearer to Evelyn's.

“How old they make me feel!” he said regretfully. “I used to be able to talk gorgeous fireworks, but I can't now. . . . My ideas fail, and I can only advance facts instead of hazarding splendid theories.”

Evelyn laid down her book.

“How very tragic!” she said. “You have my deepest sympathy! Why not take a rest-cure, or go to drink the waters at Marienbad, or some other wonder-working place?”

“Now you are laughing at me, and I'm absolutely in earnest. Do you know that I am thirty-six?”

“Thirty-six. Well?”

“It's anything but well! It's distinctly ill!”

“It seems to me,” Evelyn remarked, “that I might remind you it is wrong to be discontented! Why”—her voice lost its bantering tone, and grew suddenly serious—“how can you grumble? You have so much! Money,

birth, personality, perfect health, and, above all things, opportunity! Ah, it is wrong of you! Wrong! What more can you want than you have?"

He did not answer for a moment, and when he did his voice, too, had lost its light tone, and was curiously intense.

"What more? Why, everything! Everything that I can't have!"

A sudden anxiety crept into his companion's eyes. Diana's words recurred to her with painful distinctness:

"That man is in trouble—serious trouble, and it's going to be bad for him . . . he's on the edge of a big smash-up. You are his friend . . . save him from it. . . ."

Was it true? Was there something wrong of which she did not know? Emboldened by her fears, she turned and met his eyes, fixed upon her with a look she did not understand. She leant a little forward, and spoke low.

"Richard," she said, "is there anything wrong? Forgive me if I am making a mistake, but I cannot help thinking there is something worrying you."

Even as she spoke she did not fear that he would misunderstand her motive in asking the question, for she trusted the friendship between them, and realized that he would not consider her words an intrusion. At her question he started, and jerked his head back, with an odd gesture his friends knew well, pausing before he replied; then he spoke quietly.

"Yes," he said, "something is worrying me; was, at least. I have made my mind up now."

A sudden fear, vivid yet indefinable, struck like a cold chill at Evelyn's heart; she dreaded she knew not what, and fear, especially fear of the unknown, is of all things the most demoralizing. With an immense effort she controlled herself, and spoke quite naturally.

"I am glad you have solved the problem," she said. "A difficult decision is always apt to worry one a little."

Then a sudden idea occurred to her, and she rose.

"Let us go for a walk," she said. "It is such a beautiful evening. Will you come with me?"

He got up at once.

"With pleasure," he said. "I want to talk to you."

Despite his words, he barely spoke, but walked on with set lips and gloomy eyes for over a mile, and Evelyn, falling in with his mood, did not worry him with conversation.

At last he spoke abruptly.

"Evelyn," he said, "you called me friend just now. I am going to test that friendship—to test it to the uttermost. Let's sit down on this log if you will not be cold."

The fear in her heart took hold of her and numbed her with its chill foreboding; she sat down without answering, and he began to speak, his voice level and steady.

"As I told you a little while ago, I am thirty-six," he said, "and all my life I've never been in love . . . till now; no woman in that way has ever entered my life. I've been too busy and too interested for love, and the other thing has never attracted me. This leave, at the beginning, I met a woman, and fell in love with her; she happens to be another man's wife, and the man treats her abominably. She is neglected, dishonoured, lonely. It's the usual thing, isn't it? I've told her that I love her . . . it has gone no farther, but when I sail she goes with me. It will mean resigning my appointment. The Government won't have a District Officer who has openly carried off another man's wife. One thing more, and this very original story is finished. I hope the man, her husband, will see that the case comes on quickly. I shall make no defence; there will be none to make, and she will be divorced on a false charge. You understand what I mean? I don't want to appear more of a blackguard than I am to you that is why I have told you with this rather brutal frankness. That's all. But you gave me your friendship, and it lies with you to take it back if you think fit."

He ceased speaking, and leant back against the tree-trunk awaiting her answer, his face grim and relentless, and for a long moment there was silence—a moment that seemed to Evelyn like an eternity—and during it she could think of nothing but the curious lines of a branch just before her, which was twisted and warped by some freak of Nature to the shape of a triangle. At last, still thinking of the branch, yet conscious she must say something, she spoke.

"You have quite made up your mind to do this thing?"

"Yes. My sense of honour may be perverted, but it seems to me more dishonourable to leave her utterly alone to be insulted and disgraced by the man who should before all things protect her than to take her away and shelter her at least from further danger."

"Will not your action be the cruellest thing that has yet happened to her?"

"How can it be? I love her."

The paralysis cleared from Evelyn's brain; the twisted branch no longer claimed her attention; for the full meaning of his last words thrilled every nerve with an exquisite pain. She had been prepared for much, but she had not been prepared for this; before his cold determination she felt powerless.

"You are quite sure you love her?" she asked, even though she felt the question was superfluous. "Is there no other way?"

"No," he said; "there is no other way."

The old phrase, the phrase that had tortured him all the hideous night, stung him like the lash of a whip, and he winced under it. Despite the gathering dusk, Evelyn saw the spasm of pain that crossed his face, and was thankful that something had stirred him at last from that icy composure before which she had felt so powerless. Gathering all her forces, she made one effort to turn him.

"And because of this, because of one woman, you will throw away your work and all it means?" she cried. "Oh, I am arguing against my own sex, I know, and it is a thing I have never before done, but this is such a big, such a terrible thing; your work, your presence means the safety and well-being of thousands of human lives. On the Frontier there must be a man of strength, and courage, and foresight, a man whom other men can trust, and you are that man, and with both hands you want to throw your responsibility away from you! Against one woman's happiness lies all that! Can you dare to give it to her at such a price? I know you love her; I know there is nothing bigger than love in all this world; that it stands above all else . . . but if she really loved you, if she were worthy of such love as yours, would she take happiness at such a price?"

She paused a moment, but he made no answer, and she went on, forgetful of her own suffering, conscious only that she was fighting for more than life—the honour of the man she loved.

"You talk of resigning your appointment! Have you told her this? Does she know what it would mean? Even if you have told her, is it fair to make any one woman responsible for such an act, with all its terrible consequences, even if she loves you? It is not as if it affected only a few lives . . . it is thousands!" She paused to gain command

of herself, for in this time she knew she needed all her courage to be at its highest and her intellect at its clearest, and as she paused Richard spoke.

"You speak as though I had chosen without thinking of all that!" he said hoarsely. "I tell you I've thought and thought over it all, seen it all, tried to get out of it, but I can't—I can't! I love her . . . and there is no other way!"

"And so you will wreck your life, and what is far more important, your work? For, after all, life doesn't matter half so much as work, and you will bring shame on your name and hers."

"Shame? I tell you the shame she suffers at present is ten thousand times worse than any I can bring to her! At least with me she shall be protected, cared for, treated with the tenderness a woman needs. Evelyn, Evelyn, don't you understand?"

A great despair was enfolding Evelyn in its grip, for she realized that, despite his pain, his will was inflexible, and she was powerless to alter his decision. The time of personal suffering, of the torture of hearing his voice soften as he spoke of that other woman, of seeing the look in his eyes that told so plainly of his love was not yet, but she already realized that there was nothing to be done, that he was going out of her life for ever, shamed, dishonoured, with all his splendid work finished—and the realization was agony.

She made a last effort, though she felt how vain it was.

"So it all counts for nothing!" she said—"your powers and your fighting, your people depending on you for their safety and welfare, your staff working under you, your years of service, the reliance others have put in you and their trust. The trust of men like Prince Ramadur Singh . . . and, most of all, above all, the safety and welfare of the Frontier . . . the Frontier that means so much to us, to you and me, because it is our country. That is all to go for nothing . . . are you sure, Richard?"

He caught his breath sharply as she ended, and, leaning forward, covered his face with his hands.

"Don't!" he said hoarsely. "Ah, my God! Don't!"

For one wild moment Evelyn hoped; then he raised his head, and she saw his face, and hope died within her. When he spoke again the agony had gone from his voice, and it was

level and passionless. "You will catch cold," he said. "We had better be moving."

At the commonplace words, the quiet tone, she knew she had staked and lost, and, without a word, she rose, and they crossed the meadow and traversed the last half-mile of road, but just inside the gates of the Chase Evelyn paused.

"Richard," she said, "you told me a little while ago that I was free to take my friendship back if I chose. Does that mean it has no value for you . . . now?"

He stopped abruptly and looked at her.

"No," he said roughly. "Have I so utterly disgraced myself that you can think that of me?"

For a moment she met his eyes without speaking, then, with a sudden gesture as though she swept the past hour from her, she turned to him, all the wonderful loveliness of her face lit by some strange inward light.

"Then keep it!" she said, and held out her hands to him. "Keep it always! and remember that, if ever you should need what it means—sympathy, interest, and in so far as I can give it, help—you have only to ask, and it is yours, and that if the whole world misunderstands, your friend still knows and believes in you!"

Just for one moment she cast discretion to the winds, and let all her love and tenderness and passionate yearning vibrate in her voice, careless whether he guessed the truth, knowing only that in some way she must reach him, must make him understand. "If ever there comes a time to you when the penalty must be paid in full, if ever the love for which you are sacrificing so much fails you, if ever you are hurt past endurance . . . come to me, Richard . . . come home to me . . . and I will be ready . . . waiting . . . to help."

For a long moment Richard did not reply, for the utter unexpectedness of her words touched him very nearly, and he could only stand looking into her face; then he carried her hands to his lips.

"God bless you . . ." he said unsteadily. "God bless you . . . I can't thank you, Evelyn . . . but I shall never forget."

For a second they stood thus, then she turned blindly from him, and went across the grass to the house.

At breakfast the next morning Evelyn came up to him with no sign of suffering in her face.

"You are staying till this afternoon, are you not?" she

said, smiling into his gloomy eyes as though the previous evening had never been. "I am so glad! I only wish we could keep you longer still."

Something of the hardness faded as he looked at her; surely a man had never had a more loyal friend than this?

"If I may, I should like to stay till the five twenty-five," he answered; "there is really no need for me to get to town before six-thirty. I don't want to leave the country . . . or you."

"You are polite!" she said, teasing him a little. "The country or me! Are you sure I come into it at all?"

"A book of verses underneath the bough,
A loaf of bread, a jug of wine—and thou."

One feels one should be grateful for that little afterthought."

"Not an afterthought—a climax!" Richard retorted as he sat down. "Why deliberately refuse to see the compliment?"

"I hate Omar Khayyam!" Hugh interposed, with startling suddenness. "He's such a thoroughgoing old egotist! Always talking about his soul, and his past, and his future. Who cares a hang about his soul? I'm sure I don't! And at the end of the whole caboodle he seems as far off the solution of his precious problems as he does at the beginning. Such a rigmarole, all for nothing! It makes me sick!"

"He was a profound thinker for his age, and a fine poet as well," Gifford said, putting in a word for the luckless Persian. "Poor old chap, I don't suppose he liked being no nearer at the end than he was at the beginning, any better than you do!"

"Oh, well, he is a nuisance altogether!" Hugh exclaimed, airily dismissing the subject. "And I read a gorgeous parody the other day—of course, you have all seen it—'The Rubàiyat of a Persian Kitten,' and one line goes

"Oh, that the sole could fling the ice aside,
And with me to some Area's Haven glide!"

. . . and the kitten is sitting outside a safe, and there's fish inside! It's fine! There's lots more, and it's all just as good, but I've forgotten it. By Jove! what a rotten memory I'm getting!"

Nancy looked up suddenly from the farther end of the table.

"Mrs. Creighton gave me one of her Persian kittens, and it died!" she said. "I was horribly disappointed. Mr. Cavanagh . . . are you going to help us pick apples this afternoon? Evelyn says they want gathering!"

He looked at Evelyn, laughing.

"If she will let me," he replied. "Good heavens! It's years and years since I helped to gather apples! Are you staying, Gifford?"

Gifford shook his head.

"It's utterly impossible!" he said. "Hullo, here are the letters!"

Evelyn, looking up suddenly at the end of a long epistle from Cecile, saw Richard crumple a small old-rose envelope in his fingers, and some instinct told her from whom it came. For the remainder of the meal he was very silent, but afterwards he seemed to shake off his moodiness, and went for a long morning's golf with Hugh, and Nancy, who had been granted a holiday, went with them. When they had gone Evelyn accompanied Gifford a little way towards the station, and after he had left her she did not at once go back to the house, for she wanted to think matters out a little, and this short respite was very welcome.

It had come to this—the man she loved had given his heart to another woman, and because of it he was going to sacrifice all he should hold most dear; therein to her, Evelyn, lay the torture of it all, for all gave way to her inborn love for his work, and her jealousy for his future.

She had been so proud of him—so certain of all he would do for the country she loved, and now with all her strength she feared for him when the years should show him his mistake.

With horrible clearness she saw it all—the gradual wane of interest, the death of ambition, the heart-breaking uselessness of effort, the stained name, the loss of all that had spelled life. No woman's love, not even the noblest, could make up to him for all that, therefore, how could this woman's hope to do it? He was throwing away everything most precious for a chimera, for the second-best—and therein lay the tragedy of it all, the hopeless, miserable tragedy that must come home to him in the end, and it was her utter impotence to avert it, that went nigh to breaking Evelyn's heart.

A beech-tree stood close to the gate, and from it the leaves were dropping straightly to the earth through the quiet air, adding one by one to the carpet of gold lying beneath the

spreading branches, and Evelyn turned from the unseen stretch of meadowland to watch the gentle unceasing shower of colour. Was it typical of her life?—this quiet dying away without fuss or murmur, this complete unquestioning obedience to a law neither understood nor appreciated?

For a little while the torture of such dissolution when the pulses of life are still strong and vigorous, held her in its grip; then, with a sudden uplifting of her beautiful head, she put the suggestion with all its idle weakness from her. The false sentiment of a grief that can find pleasure in dwelling upon itself, and counting out, as it were, the amount of its own misery, was a thing to be abhorred and flung far away. Agony lay before her—the agony of seeing a man she loved with all her heart make a horrible mistake—a mistake that must ruin him, but she would not give way to weak meanderings of thought as to the precise nature and duration of that agony.

Henceforth it would not do for one instant to contemplate all that Richard's course of action meant; it remained for her to be ready to help him should he ever need it, and above all to fill her days with work, and her thoughts with all the interests that had once been so dear to her, and had for the time past faded into insignificance.

Later when she had finished her household duties she went back to the garden to get some flowers.

Those in the old walled fruit-garden proved to be the most satisfactory, and she went slowly along, picking great bunches of early chrysanthemums, till at the farther end of the garden she heard the distant clock of the parish church strike one, and turned to hurry back to the house. Then, suddenly as she turned she saw Richard at the other end of the walk.

"Have you had a good game?" she called, as she went forward.

"What lovely flowers!" he said. "Yes, I've had a splendid morning, and beaten Hugh by two holes. They are fine links, aren't they?"

"Quite, but I don't understand golf," she replied. "I've given up trying to understand about niblicks, and greens, and putties. I always thought putties were things you wound round your legs."

Richard laughed.

"Putters, not putties," he said. "You've got a little mixed."

"No wonder," she retorted. "It's a dreadful game to

understand! There are so many names to remember. Certainly they are fine links. I've heard so many people say so that I must be right in that. Look at that sky! Isn't it wonderful!"

A thin film of cloud, very high and faint, lay in a level sweep across the eastern heavens, a delicate tracery of white against the blue, and as the light struck it it was reflected in a sheet of pale gold.

Before Richard could speak, however, Nancy came running across the grass.

"Penelope has caught a rat!" she cried. "Such a monster! I heard her growling awfully, and went to see. And all by herself!"

"That's very brave of her," Richard said, as Nancy slipped her hand into his. "Penelope is the tabby I saw this morning, isn't she?"

"Yes. She's rather pretty, don't you think? Of course she has only got one ear, but she has nice eyes and lovely whiskers!"

"She looks very gentle and good-tempered," Richard answered, with praiseworthy honesty, then turned to Evelyn.

"Are we going to pick apples this afternoon?" he said.

"Most certainly. You will help us? How nice of you!"

So all that afternoon was spent in the orchard, Hugh and Hilary climbing trees, and the others gathering the red apples as they fell, the children wild with excitement as they rioted about on the soft turf, their elders content for the most part to look on.

They had a very early tea out among the trees, and then the boys began to stagger to and fro to the house with big baskets full of fruit, while the others rested from their labours. All the afternoon Evelyn had not dared to let herself think of the parting in store; but, despite all her resolution, it came with a shock that turned her sick and faint.

Richard, pausing in the back-breaking task of stooping after the tiny apples that had been shaken down and lay thick on the grass, glanced at his watch, and uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"By Jove! I must go! I've only just time to catch my train!"

Evelyn put down the basket she held.

"I'll come in at once," she said. "There is the trap coming round now."

She crossed the road and the leaf-strewn lawn by his side without speaking again, and waited in the drawing-room while he ran upstairs to make his toilet. Now that the actual moment of parting had come all power to feel was suspended, and she could only wait passively for the end.

She could hear his quick footsteps overhead, and thought to herself that in a few moments the sound of those footsteps would be a memory only. Now he was coming downstairs, now—he entered the room ready for his journey, put down the gloves he held, and came straight across to her.

“You’ll write to me?” he said. “Evelyn, you will write? Let me know how you are, and how things go with you . . . and if we never see each other again . . .”

He broke off suddenly, took her hands in his, and looked straight into her eyes.

“You have been very good to me,” he said, and his voice deepened. “This has been a time to remember. Will you say good-bye to me as you did years ago?”

The suspension of feeling was over now; she longed wildly, passionately, for some sign that he cared a little, even a little, some assurance that one day she might hope to see him again.

“Yes, I will write,” she said. “But you will come back, Richard? Promise me that, somehow, some time, you will come back?”

Wonder crept into his eyes; he looked at her for a moment without speaking, then came a step nearer.

“I promise that if I live I will come back . . . some day,” he said. “I can’t thank you for all you have done, or all you have been to me, but, Evelyn, for the sake of our friendship—may I?”

The colour flamed in her face, but she did not hesitate.

“Yes,” she said very quietly, and just for one exquisite moment she felt the touch of his lips on hers; then she drew back.

“Good-bye, my dear,” she said. “God bless you now and always!”

“And you. Good-bye.”

A close hand-grip, a long steady gaze, then with a quick movement he turned away, squaring his shoulders and throwing up his head with the odd little gesture she knew so well. She heard the front-door close sharply behind him, saw him walk rapidly towards the gate, and stood for a moment feeling utterly unable to move.

Just as he reached the gate Nancy rushed across the grass, and pushed something into his hand.

"I gathered them all . . . just now. They'll keep fresh a long while!" she panted. "You'll take them, won't you?"

Richard looked down at the bunch of autumn flowers tied tightly together with string, and his lips twitched; then he turned to the waiting child.

"Give me one special one to keep always," he said, "one that I can take to India"; and with trembling fingers she tugged a tiny, close-curved, white chrysanthemum from its fellows, and held it out to him, her eyes on his face.

"Promise!" she said.

He took it, broke off the stalk, and placed the blossom in his pocket-book.

"I promise," he said gently. "Good-bye, kiddie."

One moment she clung to him, her lips against his cheek, then she wrenched herself away, and dashed across the grass, for she would not let him see her cry, and with stern, set face he got into the waiting trap and drove away.

Evelyn had watched the little scene from the side window of the drawing-room, and as the trap began to move the mysterious spell that had held her motionless passed. She stumbled rather than walked to the front-door, and flinging it wide stood listening to the regular beat of the horse's hoofs on the hard road. For a minute or two they were very distinct, then they began to grow fainter and fainter; when at last they ceased altogether she turned and went indoors.

CHAPTER VIII

THE London train was very empty, and Richard secured a carriage to himself, and sat for a long while gazing at the flying landscape, neither smoking nor opening his paper.

It surprised him to find out how dear Pangle had become to him, and what a tremendous place his friendship for Evelyn had in his life. Strange, how that short meeting nearly six years ago in the crowded ball-room at Buckingham Palace had influenced his life! Nancy, too—wild, impetuous,

eager little Nancy—with genius lying under her rough curls, and the love of the world in her passionate little heart, she would be almost grown up by the time his next leave was due. Would he find her changed, or would — Like the stab of an old wound, memory pricked him. For him there would be no “next leave.” He had forgotten what lay before him.

The short autumn dusk had fallen when the train drew up in Liverpool Street Station, and he suddenly realized that if he were to keep the appointment he had made there was no time to lose.

He drove straight to Berkeley Square, from thence to his club, where he dined, and from there to Green Street, on the way looking at the letter he had received that morning.

“Come about half-past nine,” he read. “Norman will be out; he is away; but I shall be at home and I must see you.”

The misery and worry all faded from his mind as the hansom drew up at Mrs. Leighton’s door, and he leapt out with the eagerness of a boy.

The discreet footman ushered him into the rose-red drawing-room, announced him softly and departed, and from the lounge where she usually sat, Violet Leighton arose to greet him.

He crossed the room swiftly and took her in his arms, and for a moment neither of them knew anything but that they had met again after parting; for she realized now the tremendous power this man had over her, realized that she would give everything, except public opinion, to call him really and indeed her lover.

He loosed his arms from about her at last, and sat down by her side, talking eagerly, laying before her his plans for the immediate future.

“When it has become history, and people have forgotten a little, I can perhaps get another appointment,” he said, “and in the meantime I’ve quite enough for us to live on comfortably, and we can travel. You said the other day that you wanted to see Japan. Well, we can go there. Oh, there is the world for us!”

He caught her hands, holding them closely, and she shivered a little, and hid her shiver with a laugh.

“Was there ever anyone in the world quite so impetuous?” she said, leaning her head back against the pale silk of a big cushion. “What a splendid savage you would have made, Dick.”

"Should I? Don't you think all real passion is apt to be uncivilized? How can I speak quietly, or sit at the other side of the room when I love you so? Answer!"

She could see a pulse in his throat beating furiously, and at the sight her own desire drove her fiercely onward. She leant a little forward, the light falling on her face, her eyes misty beneath their half-closed lids—falling, too, on the curve of her shoulder, flushing the white skin a delicate rose.

"Yet you sit there," she half whispered, and there was challenge in her voice.

Richard caught his breath, and spoke thickly.

"Violet, Violet! How beautiful you are!"

For a moment he was close to her, breathing heavily, his eyes blazing, his brain reeling; then, with an effort that brought the sweat to his forehead, he drew back, clenching his hands on the arms of his chair, forcibly holding himself away from her, every nerve and muscle strained to its uttermost.

Then a thing utterly unforeseen happened, for the door opened and someone came in.

With a smothered exclamation, Violet turned her head, for she had given the strictest orders that she was not to be disturbed; but the exclamation was cut short, for there, by the closed door, stood her husband.

Even then, shaken as she was by the stress of the last few moments, her superb self-control did not desert her, and she waved him to a chair.

"Ah, you've come home, Norman?" she said negligently. "It was dull at Standham, I suppose?"

Norman Leighton ignored her as if she did not exist and, without even glancing at her, went slowly across to the fireplace and stood looking at Richard, and in the short silence that followed Violet was perhaps the most tranquil of the three, for, though she hated scenes and had not the least idea what her husband might do or say, yet the next few minutes promised at least to be absorbingly interesting.

At last Leighton spoke:

"I am afraid I am interrupting an interesting conversation," he said. "You did not tell me you were to have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Cavanagh this evening, Violet. I thought he was out of town."

"I returned this evening," Richard answered curtly, and Leighton shot a swift glance at his wife.

"And called immediately to inquire after Violet's well-being. You are considerate and most attentive to your friends."

Then suddenly the man's self-control left him, and with two swift strides he was at Richard's side.

"You fool! You fool!" he said thickly. "Do you think that I am blind or deaf, that you come here without even being certain whether I may or may not return? Are you so certain of privacy or my complacency?"

Richard's face was very pale and set, and underneath his knit brows his eyes glittered dangerously, but Leighton disregarded the signal and despised him for his very quietness. His own face was flushed, his eyes alight with malice, his whole heavy figure trembling and twitching.

"You are a fool! I say. You and my wife! You are both fools! . . . Ho . . . ho! My wife! It's a fine story for the clubs, isn't it? Cavanagh, the popular idol! Cavanagh, the saint! It would sound well shouted by all the newsboys in London, wouldn't it? But you shan't hear it! no . . . I'll be generous. . . . She's told you the same old tale, I suppose? She's neglected and ill-used, and you've sworn to protect her always . . . ah! I thought so!"

He broke off, and his lips curled at the flash of rage that for the moment lit Cavanagh's eyes, and with an immense effort controlled himself somewhat.

"There's one point on which I should like enlightenment," he said. "Have I returned too early . . . or too late?"

The smouldering wrath in Richard's eyes blazed suddenly into a white heat of fury, and the next instant he had Leighton by the throat, shaking him, for all his hugeness, like a terrier shakes a rat, and flung him backwards on the lounge.

"You hound!" he said, and the suppressed rage in his voice cut through the stillness like a whip. "You unspeakable hound!"

For a moment Leighton was still, and the curious purple flush deepened round his mouth; then he sat up, the madness of his rage apparently gone from him, and looked from Cavanagh to his wife.

"By God! I'll make you pay for that!" he said. "I repeat, you are a fool. But as for you——" he turned on Violet, who was standing by her chair watching the scene with wide, curious eyes. "I'll——"

Richard interrupted him;

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Leighton, for behaving with such violence in your drawing-room, but whatever there is to be said shall be said decently or not at all. Do you understand me, Leighton?"

Leighton turned to him, breathing short.

"Oh, I quite understand you. You are refreshingly simple in your methods. You've given me a weapon to my hands, and by Heaven I'll use it. You asked me once to stir up interest in Kultänn in the House. I will . . . and I'll stir up interest in the private affairs of its Deputy-Commissioner as well. I'll make you pay for what you did a moment ago. I'll not rest while there's a stone left unturned to your harm, and when I've played with you long enough—you and your glorious reputation—I'll break it like the bubble it is. . . . I'll break it . . . and you with it!"

He stopped, choked, half rose to his feet, then, with a curious gasping sound, fell back on the lounge, his face working, his fingers tearing at his collar.

With a smothered exclamation, Richard took a step forward, but before he could ring, Violet was at his side.

"Go, go!" she said. "No, he's not dying. I've seen him like this before. Adams, his man, understands . . . but you must go first. Walk out as though nothing had happened . . . go . . . at once. . . ."

She pushed him towards the door, and Richard, seeing the urgency of the situation, obeyed without further protest.

For a moment after he had left her Violet waited in the centre of the room, listening intently, then, going to the window, she pulled aside the blind very cautiously, and watched for him to leave the house. When she had seen him cross the road, she waited still for a few moments, then, with sudden violence, rang the bell, and when the man answered it, she was on her knees by her husband's side trying to unfasten his collar, terror in her face.

"Send Adams at once! Your master is ill!" she cried; and he retired in haste to summon Leighton's valet, wondering if the surmises of the servants' hall were correct or not, since Richard Cavanagh had obviously stayed for some little while after Leighton's return, and had left with no sign of haste or disturbance.

The next morning Richard had an important interview, lunched at his club, and then sat reading in the smoking-room, and trying to plan out a course of action. Leighton's

action had precipitated matters, and he could not in the least guess what his attitude would be. There was nothing for it but to wait till he heard from Mrs. Leighton, and waiting was the last thing for which he was fitted.

The day dragged horribly. Contrasted with yesterday it was dreadful; for, although he had many matters to arrange, he felt absolutely incapable of settling to any one of them.

Late the following day Mrs. Leighton rang him up to tell him that her husband was for the present in the doctor's hands, but that his condition need not cause any anxiety, and also that she would call in her car the following morning to ask him, Richard, if he could spare her an hour or two; and at twelve precisely the next day Mrs. Leighton's electric brougham drew up outside the house in Berkeley Square, and he went out to drive with her.

She was leaning back in the corner of the carriage, and the air was heavy with the scent of the great cluster of pale carnations that she wore and the fragrance of her clothes. Her eyes lit up as he got in, and she laid her hand on his knee.

"I have told Walters to drive us to Richmond Park," she said. "It is quiet there, and we need quiet. We have so much to say. You have had a busy morning?"

"Very busy, and I've another important appointment when I return. But I'm free now till three. How is——"

"Norman? Oh, he is going on all right. These attacks are recurrent, you know—nothing to really worry about. By the way, you did not tell me if you had a pleasant time at Pangley."

She was determined to keep the conversation, such as it was, in the vein of trivialities, so he took her cue at once, and until they had reached the silence and loneliness of Richmond Park they did not once touch on the matter that had brought them together.

Then Violet took a letter from her handbag.

"I heard from Bobbie this morning," she said. "Would you care to read it? He seems to be going on pretty well, and is simply longing for your return."

He took it, wincing a little at her carelessly spoken words, for he knew how Kinloch's letter would bring back the old life, for Bobbie was an excellent correspondent, and the letter was brimming with the life and colour of the Frontier. He read it through with close-shut lips, and passed it back without comment.

She looked at him curiously.

"Doesn't it interest you enormously?" she asked. "Bobbie really does tell you something in a letter. Dear boy! I hope he will get on well."

"Oh, he'll do well enough. He has got it in him," Richard answered. "But what was it you wanted to see me about? Not Bobbie?"

He turned a little, so as to face her, and at the direct question she did not attempt to evade the subject any longer. Instead, she spoke as directly as he.

"About Friday," she said. "Richard . . . I can't go with you."

He controlled a start.

"Can't go with me! What do you mean?"

"Just that. I can't go. I've been thinking and thinking, and it's no use. I can't do it."

"But why not?" he said harshly—"why not? I don't understand."

"Because it's wrong. I am Norman's wife, and my duty lies with him. If I went with you I should be shirking. . . ."

For a moment he felt helpless and utterly bewildered at her sudden change of outlook; then his will reasserted itself.

"You talk as though it were a question of no more importance than having your dinner!" he said roughly. "We have settled all that. It is too late to change now. You love me, and how can you possibly have any duty towards the man who has consistently insulted and degraded you for years? It's absurd! Impossible!"

With a little gesture of appeal she raised her hands.

"Oh, don't be angry with me!" she said, and her voice trembled. "Do you think my decision has cost me nothing?"

The piteous entreaty of eyes and tone went to his heart. He caught her hands and leant forward, his face close to hers.

"Violet! Violet! I'm not angry! Don't look like that! Angry with you? Why, I couldn't be! But don't you understand that I can't give you up? It's impossible—utterly impossible! You've wound yourself round my very heart-strings; you've filled my whole world. How can you talk of not coming so calmly? Now . . . on the very verge of freedom for you and love for us both? Dearest, I can't live without you! I won't go and leave you here! How could I, knowing what I know of your life?"

She did not cry as he ceased, but her breath came in a long sobbing gasp, like that of a child, and he spoke again, eagerly, passionately, his voice throbbing, his eyes alight.

"Why should you consider yourself bound to a man who has broken faith with you over and over again? Why sacrifice your life to such an idea, and yourself to his caprice? Dear, dear, you shall not! I love you so! I love you so! Violet! does that mean nothing to you?"

Once again his ardour roused her, forcing her, unwilling though she was, into the realm of truth and reality. She shuddered a little, and the shudder was genuine.

He saw the pallor creep to her face, and the sudden darkening of her eyes, and his own blazed.

"Violet, Violet! Don't you see what it means to me? Can't you understand?"

She looked at him, and her breath came quickly.

"You talk as though I were made of stone!" she said, a little hoarsely. "Dickie . . . Dickie, don't you know that I love you?"

He caught her in his arms, careless of time or place, kissing her lips, fiercely, passionately, then released her, and drew back, his face white and strained.

For a moment neither of them spoke, then, with trembling fingers, she straightened the furs his embrace had disordered, and at her movement he spoke.

"I think . . . if you don't mind, I will leave you at Richmond and go for a tramp. Will you put me down at the gates?"

She made a gesture of assent, but she dared not trust her voice, for a storm of emotion was shaking her.

All her life she had been selfish, heartless, careless of the very rudiments of honour, incapable of even genuine passion, which might, perhaps, have been some excuse for her conduct with men; and now, suddenly, when she least expected it, she was caught in her own trap, and made to suffer all the torments she had so deliberately set herself to inflict on others.

And the sting of the whole thing was that this man knew—knew the power he had over her, knew what his presence meant, just as she knew what hers meant to him, and the realization of his knowledge was more bitter than all else. To him, it was the natural corollary of his love: to her, the depth of degradation.

The brougham had traversed a mile through the park

before either of them spoke again. Richard sat well back, looking straight in front of him, his figure rigid and tense, his arms folded, his mouth grimly set. At the sight of him a sudden sense of self-pity overcame Violet; she turned away and buried her face in her muff in a storm of weeping.

"Violet, my darling! what is it? What have I done to hurt you?" He caught her in his arms, speaking wildly, in a very passion of self-reproach, cursing himself for his own lack of self-control a minute before, trying to comfort a grief he did not understand.

By-and-by, from sheer exhaustion, she grew calmer, and drew away from him, fighting for the self-control she had never before lost, while Richard sat miserably silent, longing for her to speak, not knowing himself what to say.

At last she broke the silence.

"Don't come any farther. . . . I want to be alone! We are just at the gates."

He leant forward and took her hands, looking into her face, regardless of the fact that she shrank from his gaze.

"Dear . . . dear, I can't go like this. I won't! I've hurt you, made you miserable. . . . Oh! I'm a clumsy fool. . . . Tell me what it is. Don't send me away like this!"

She drew back, so that her face was in shadow.

"Oh, what is the good?" she said, and her voice shook. "It must end. . . . I can't come . . . can't leave Norman. . . . Oh, go—go! If you love me, go!"

The passion in her voice stilled him. With a sudden sick feeling of despair, he let down the window and spoke to the chauffeur, then, as the car drew up, he turned to her.

"Telephone for me if you want me," he said. "The club is the best place; I am more certain to be there;" and then for an instant his self-command left him, and his breath came in a long, shuddering sigh.

"Oh, my God!" he said hoarsely. "Let me see you again before I go!"

He waited for her answer, but none came, and the love and agony died out of his face, leaving it very pale and set. He took his gloves and stick from the opposite seat, and, without a word, rose to his feet. The next moment he was standing alone on the path, and the brougham was turning the corner of the road.

The following day was wet and stormy, with fierce gusts of wind driving sheets of rain against the windows, and

tearing the last leaves from the shivering trees, and all day long Violet Leighton refused to see anyone, and sat alone, trying to regain a reasonable attitude.

She suffered intensely, for she felt humiliated to the dust, and added to her humiliation was the bitter sense of defeat. For once in her life she had met a man who loved her and was strong enough to resist her. Her impotence against his strong will, her inability to sacrifice herself in any way for his love, her misery at his departure, which was certainly real, and her anger at that unaccountable breakdown—all combined to give her a wretched day. At four o'clock she telephoned to his club, and before five he was announced.

He came in with a look in his eyes she was beginning to know—the look of a man who fights for his life—and at the sight, something of her resentment against him faded away. He came straight across the room to her and took her hands.

“Does this mean you are coming?” he said eagerly. “Think! We have plenty of time. Ah, tell me you’ll come! Don’t let me go away knowing you will go on in the old miserable fashion!”

She sat down near the fire, and drew him down beside her. A sudden idea crossed her mind—an idea worth following, for, above all things, she did not wish to lose him altogether, and though she had not the slightest intention of keeping the promise she was about to make, yet she felt that it was wisest to temporize.

“I can’t come!” she said. “Ah, Richard! I can’t come! My duty is here with Norman, even if it breaks my heart . . . only . . . I promise if I can’t bear it any longer . . . if it grows too bad, then I will come to you. There will never be anyone else, Dickie—never! May I come? Will you be ready?”

“Ready?” he echoed, and his voice shook. “Ah! don’t you know that my very life is yours, that I shall be just hungering for the sight of your face? Come to me now, come to me when we are old and grey-headed, only come . . . this year . . . ten years hence . . . I shall be ready, waiting. Ah! Don’t you understand? Don’t you know how it tears my very heart to leave you?”

His voice broke, and he bent his head over her hands, and in that moment, when his face was hidden, a gleam of triumph shot into her eyes. If she suffered, he should

suffer too—it was only just ; and suddenly her baffled desire and all it entailed, swelled into a fierce determination to hurt him as he had, all unwittingly, hurt her. He had made his own terms with her, had refused to fall and blindly worship, and had as crowning misdemeanour roused something in her nature of which she had been utterly unaware. Could any man have a blacker indictment against him ?

After a moment he lifted his head.

" You are all the world to me ! " he said. " You hold my life and my heart in your hands. If ever you need me, I will come, even if it be from the ends of the earth. Violet . . . Violet ! "

She leant her head back against his shoulder and looked up into his eyes.

" I love you ! " she said very softly. " There is none in my world but you . . . there never will be ! "

Then suddenly she drew back from him and rose.

" We have been very happy, haven't we ? " she said wistfully. " You have helped me to be brave. Good-bye, my dearest . . . and remember all I have said. "

One long moment he held her, then, without a word, he turned away and went out of the room, and she waited motionless till she heard the street-door close after him ; then, with a gesture of supreme weariness, she lifted her arms slowly above her head, stood for a moment gazing at her reflection, and, with a long-drawn, tired sigh, let them fall to her side.

Richard went back to Berkeley Square vaguely conscious that he had many things to do, and only a short time in which to do them, and it was not till he went to bed about three o'clock in the morning that he had time to realize what had taken place.

She was not coming with him, after all. That one fact dinned itself into his ears with maddening persistence. . . . He was to go back alone . . . alone. He was surprised in a dreary fashion that the thought of his work—the work to which now there would be no barrier—did not cheer him. When he had thought of it as all over, every nerve had ached at the prospect of the loss ; now it seemed a thing of no great importance either way. The wrench of the unlooked-for parting had seemed to tear a part of his very being with it. He felt incapable of forming any plan, of concentrating his

brain on any ideas. All he knew was that suddenly something vital had gone out of his life.

All through the dreary night he lay awake, and after a while, added to his own pain, came the thought of Violet Leighton's future. Small wonder that he was tired and sick at heart when he arose ; and when Gifford was announced, about eleven o'clock, he was greeted by him with an exclamation of dismay.

" Good heavens, Dick ! what on earth have you been up to ? " he exclaimed. " You're looking a perfect wreck ! "

He crossed to the window and beckoned him over without waiting for a reply.

" You've not slept, and your nerves are all on edge ! " he said critically. " That's not the way to go back after leave. Georgie will be here presently ; he wired to me last night. Buck up, old chap ! We are going to haul you out to lunch with us, and we'll try to forget you are going away. "

Relieved of the necessity of making plans for himself, Richard endeavoured to follow Gifford's advice and " buck up," for the last thing on earth that he wanted was pity ; and when Sir George arrived the three friends spent quite a pleasant afternoon.

Sir George drove them down to Tilbury, and they both went on board with Richard to inspect his quarters and obtain the last few moments of his company, for he had not gone on till almost the sailing-time.

To the untrained eye the big liner appeared to be in the wildest confusion. Everywhere was hurry and noise, and as the siren bellowed its first warning, Gifford turned to Richard, speaking on the impulse of the moment.

" Dickie, old chap, there's been something worrying you," he said, seeing Sir George's attention was for the moment claimed elsewhere. " I'm not going to ask questions . . . but . . . couldn't I have helped you ? "

Richard's eyes met his friend's, and there was no mistaking their pain.

" If you could have done, I should have told you," he said ; " and, anyway, it's over now. It's all right, old chap . . . it was very good of you. Will you give Evelyn a message for me ? Tell her that there was another way, after all. I think she will understand. Thanks. "

The siren sounded again, and Sir George turned sharply, and the confusion all around became ten times more con-

founded. Porters scurried to and fro with luggage ; porters carried handbags ; porters hurried along, dragging heavy trunks ; maids stood guarding chairs and rugs ; women rushed to and fro in search of mislaid baggage ; children were crying ; ship's officers shouting orders ; and above all the clang and racket was the hoarse roar of escaping steam.

The siren let forth a last long-drawn, appalling yell, and Richard stretched out a hand to Sir George and Gifford, the muscles round his mouth hardening.

"Good-bye, Gifford ; good-bye, Georgie. Thanks for seeing me off. I've had a splendid time. Write, won't you ?"

Gifford gripped his hand hard.

"Good luck to you, old chap," he said, a trifle unsteadily — "now and always. Damn it all ! there's 'All on shore !'"

"Good-bye, Richard. Best wishes. Take care of yourself, old man."

Sir George's tone was curt, but Richard knew the reason, and for a moment the three gripped hands in silence, looking in each other's eyes. Then :

"All off ! All off !" was yelled in their ears, and Richard squared his shoulders and threw back his head. There was a last quick handshake, and they were hustled on shore by a swearing official only just in time. The gangways were withdrawn, there was a last yell from the siren, a crowding of passengers to the rails, then a slowly widening stretch of green water between the boat and the quay, and the great liner had started on her voyage.

Neither Gifford nor Sir George spoke, but they stood watching the friend they loved, and Richard watched them in return, standing very still, with set, stern face, and head thrown up in the manner they knew so well.

When the faces on board were indistinct, and Richard's figure could no longer be discerned, they both turned away, as if by mutual consent, and Gifford pulled up his coat-collar, for a drizzle of rain had begun to fall.

"Damn the rain !" he growled. "What filthy weather it is !"

"Filthy !" Sir George agreed, and not another word passed between them till they were back in town and had reached their club.

The smoking-room was deserted, and Gifford dropped into a big chair by the fire, lit a cigarette, and began to smoke it

very fast. When he had quite finished it, he threw the end into the fire and kicked a footstool across the room.

"I hope the dear old chap will have a good passage," he said. "What made him go from town instead of taking the P.L.M. express and joining the boat at Marseilles?"

"He is taking some present or other over to the Rajah of somewhere," was Sir George's extremely lucid reply. "I don't know exactly what, but it was a thing that had to go on board here, and he was not to lose sight of it. The *Indus* is a good boat. He ought to be all right."

"He's not looking as well as I should wish," Gifford remarked. "Still, on the whole, he's as sound as a horse. He ought to be all right. What are you doing to-night?"

And with that Richard's name dropped out of the conversation, for neither of them would mention, even to the other the thing that worried them with regard to him.

As for Richard, wrapped in a heavy coat, he settled himself on deck, and watched the grey, rain-swept shores as the ship forged ahead on her way to the sea, trying to realize that his long-looked-for leave was over and that five years must pass before he would again set foot in England.

The Channel, however, with its usual glorious uncertainty, proved to be exceedingly rough, and before night fell, Richard, who was by no means a good sailor, was feeling too ill to be conscious of anything except extreme physical discomfort, which was, perhaps, the best thing that could happen.

The glorious autumn weather had certainly broken up, and on the same evening, when Richard was just beginning to wish that the boat would go down, with all on board, Evelyn, coming in from a long walk, and seeing the clouds rising rapidly in the west, began to grow anxious for Richard. She was possessed these last few days of a feverish unrest, and felt that only by tiring herself physically till she was worn out could she live through those days till she should hear publicly of the thing Richard had done.

Hugh met her in the hall, waving a telegram.

"Gifford's coming down to-night," he said. "Just wired from Tilbury. Listen! 'Richard off. Seven-fifty.' Why the deuce are people so stingy about telegrams? 'Oh, I am so hungry. Is it nearly tea-time?'"

He went off into the firelit drawing-room that looked so cosy after the greyness of the gathering night. Diana went upstairs to take off her things, and just for one moment Evelyn

stayed by herself in the darkness of the hall, clinging to the broad banister as though it were something human, for, for the moment, she felt she could bear the strain no longer, that she must give way to the agony that racked her, must at least be relieved of the necessity of laughing and talking as though nothing were amiss.

She heard Hugh whistling, and upstairs Hilary's high, sweet treble singing "Bonnie Dundee"; but all the familiar sounds of everyday life seemed to pass her by, to mean less than nothing. She was alone, waiting for the blow to fall—the blow of which everyone else was totally unconscious.

"Evelyn, are you ill?"

It was Nancy's anxious voice at her elbow, her face showing pale and troubled in the gathering dusk, and with a great effort she answered the child quietly.

"No, dear. Run upstairs and change your frock for tea. I shall be up in a moment."

The interruption had served in a manner to bring her back into touch with everyday life, where she could once more regain command of herself, and when, a few moments later, she went into the drawing-room, there was no sign of fear or trouble in her face.

Dinner was put off till Gifford's arrival, and as the hour drew near, Evelyn grew sick and faint with anxiety. Nancy had been eager to sit up, in case there was a message from Richard, but Evelyn had been firm in her refusal, and as the child left the room, Diana looked up from her book.

"Play something!" she said. "Play the second 'Hungarian Rhapsody,' there's a darling. It is such a rough jolly tune. It matches the night."

So Evelyn went to the piano, and presently the wild, joyous tune crashed out. Its wildness suited her mood just then, and its exacting technique taxed all her powers. Just as she had finished came Gifford's knock and ring, and Evelyn did a thing she had never done in her life before—stopped short in the middle of a phrase and a bar, and went into the hall.

Gifford was taking off his coat, and when he had given it to the maid, came across to her, with a smile.

"Well, we saw him off!" he said. "Wished him good luck and a safe return. Ah!" as they entered the drawing-room, "how splendid it is to get near a fire! Oh, by the way, Evelyn, he sent you a message. I was to tell you that there was another way, after all, and that he will write. It sounds

mysterious," he added, with a laugh; "but I dare say you will understand."

Evelyn went to bed about eleven, but it was late before she slept, for Gifford's news had filled her mind with a relief almost as great as the preceding anxiety. What had happened she did not know, but of a certainty Richard had left England alone, and his message meant an alteration of the plans she had so dreaded. The first overwhelming mistake had been averted, and till his letter came explaining matters, she could do nothing but wait, and pray for his future.

She slept at last and awoke some hours after to hear the rain beating against the windows and the wind roaring in the chimney, and for a moment she lay in that semi-conscious state that follows deep sleep; then she became aware of a stir in the room, and, turning over, she saw Nancy, her white-clad figure showing against the darkness, kneeling by one of the windows, her face raised, her hands clenched on the sill, and in a lull of the gale Evelyn heard broken, despairing snatches of words.

"O God, please don't let the ship go down . . . don't let him be drowned. . . . *O God!* . . . please . . . please!"

Evelyn rose and held out her hand.

"Nancy!" she said softly, "come to me, dear."

Nancy started violently, sprang up, and stumbled across the room, her face showing pale and terrified in the half-light from the storm-hidden moon.

"Evelyn! Evelyn! Do you think it will go down? Oh, do you?"

Evelyn drew the child's shivering form into her arms without a word, covering her up warmly, and holding her close, and Nancy burst into passionate tears. For a while Evelyn let her cry undisturbed, then she spoke.

"Darling, hush! Be brave, Nancy! Why, you are as cold as ice!"

She smoothed back the tangled curly hair, and after a little the strained grip of the child's hands relaxed, and she stopped crying.

"It's so rough. . . . I was so frightened!" she said pitifully. "And I couldn't sleep. Evelyn, you don't think God will let him be drowned, do you? Say you don't!"

Evelyn kissed the tear-stained cheek very tenderly.

"Darling, I am quite sure God will take care of him, now and always," she said, and at the answer Nancy

ceased trembling, and her next question came in awestruck tones.

"Are you sure—quite sure.?"

"Quite! Wherever he is, God will take care of him, dear. You must never doubt that. It is almost impossible for us never to be frightened or anxious, especially about those we love, but He understands that. You must try not to forget it, dear."

"I will try," Nancy whispered. "Indeed, I did think so, only I was frightened at the storm. And he will come back, won't he? He said he would last Monday, when I went to wake him. . . . I will be brave . . . truly I will. He told me to, you know . . . so, of course, I shall try frightfully hard. I didn't mean to wake you, dearest; I am sorry."

"That doesn't matter; indeed, I am glad you did." Are you comfy, sweetheart? That's all right. Now try to go to sleep."

Comforted and warm, the child obeyed, but Evelyn lay for a long time awake, gazing at the clouds as they rushed across the sky on the bosom of the gale, and something of the peace her words had brought to Nancy crept into her own soul, for she knew that whatever danger or hardship should beset the man she loved, he was, and always must be, in the keeping of God.

CHAPTER IX

BOBBY KINLOCH came riding into the compound after a hard day spent supervising the work on the reservoir that was in process of making, five miles up the Kultanar. The mirāb was newly appointed and full of conceit, and Bobby had found it necessary to put the fear of God and the English into him with some force. Consequently he was pleased with himself, and longed excessively for a bath.

In the compound stood a tonga, and at the horse's head an armed orderly, rubbing the horse's velvet nose. Three half-naked coolies were chattering by the gate, and on the steps of the bungalow Ramshar Khan was holding converse of no peaceful type with the strapping Pathan tonga-driver.

Kinloch drew rein with a puzzled frown, then a smile broke over his sunburnt face, and his blue eyes danced, and Ramshar Khan broke off his harangue and hurried down the steps, his keen, hawk-like face alight with happiness.

"Sahib! His Excellency is here. The Presence has come back! The heaven-born has returned to us his children!" And even as he spoke, behind him in the doorway appeared Richard Cavanagh's erect figure and broad shoulders, and Kinloch flung himself off his horse and ran up the steps.

"I say, sir, this is ripping!" he cried, his face flushing under its tan. "We didn't expect you for another week. I'm awfully glad to see you again! Had a good time?"

Richard returned the warm hand-clasp and smiled.

"How are you, Bobby? Fit? That's right. Yes, I've had a very good time, thank you. Order some tea, will you, and tell Ramshar Khan to kick that tonga-driver out, and to see Shere Dil is rubbed down at once. He's lathered badly."

Kinloch hurried to obey, and a few minutes later entered the big room, half drawing-room, half library, where all social functions were held, and where Ramshar Khan had had tea set.

Richard Cavanagh was standing back to him as he entered, looking absently at some photographs on a table, and there was a look about the square set of his shoulders and the angle of his head that told Kinloch there was something amiss.

He wheeled round as Bobby entered, his mouth hard, and the two little upright lines that his junior knew of old between his brows, then came across to the table, with a quick, decisive step.

"After dinner I'll look through your reports," he said. "Now tell me about yourself. All's well?"

The frown disappeared as he spoke, and Bobby flung himself into an eager recital of social doings and odds and ends of news, leaving everything official to be dealt with later.

Presently he leant forward, and spoke with added eagerness.

"You met my sister, I know. I'm so awfully glad. She mentioned you several times in her letters to me, and said you were quite friends."

"Yes, we met frequently," Richard answered quietly. "And I'm forgetting my messages. She sent love to you, of course, and several presents, which I have safely stowed away."

"How good of you to be bothered with things for me! And

yourself, sir—you had an interview with the King, didn't you ? Vi sent me a cutting about it from the *Times*, and the Birthday Honours. Please allow me to congratulate you, though it's not as good as you ought to have had ! ”

The eager words and the genuine pleasure in Kinloch's face banished the grimness from Richard's expression for a moment. He took the outstretched hand and shook it warmly.

“ Thanks, Bobby ! ” he said ; “ it's very nice of you to say so.”

Kinloch flushed under his tan.

“ I mean it ! ” he said ; and Richard smiled.

“ I know you do,” he answered, and laid his hand for a moment on the other's shoulder. Then he took a letter from his pocket-book.

“ That's from your sister,” he said. “ She asked me to deliver it personally.”

Kinloch took it with a beaming smile.

“ Thanks awfully, sir. How is she looking ? Is she well ? And what sort of man is Norman, her husband ? I've never seen him, you know, and, though Vi is always promising to send me a photograph, she has never done so.”

His clear blue eyes saw his chief's face harden with a peculiar grimness that he knew well.

“ Your sister seemed perfectly well when I saw her last,” Richard answered. “ I'm afraid I'm not a good hand at describing people, so you must wait for the promised photograph of Mr. Leighton. Send Ramshar Khan to my room, will you ? ”

That was all, but it was enough to make Kinloch feel as though someone had thrown cold water in his face, and he stared after Cavanagh for a minute or two before opening his letter.

An hour or two later Colonel Henderson came up to the bungalow to welcome back his friend, and found Richard at his writing-table, already beginning to take the work in hand.

The two men shook hands and greeted one another warmly, for the liking between them was mutual, the Colonel's one lamentation being on the subject of Richard's profession.

“ Damned shame Cavanagh's a civilian ! Damned shame. Fine soldier wasted ! ”

Richard pulled up a wicker lounge-chair, and pushed his papers aside.

“ Well, Colonel, how's the gout ? ” he asked, when the first

greetings were over. "Better, I hope. Will you have a cigar or pipe? There's tobacco at your elbow."

The elder man dropped into the chair and grunted.

"Very glad to see you back again—very glad," he said. "Pipe, thanks. Yes, it's a bit better just now."

"That's good."

Richard lit a cigarette himself and leant back in his chair, waiting for the Colonel to begin, for he knew quite well that there was some other reason for his call than that of politeness or even friendship, and he waited to hear what it was.

After a minute or two it came.

"Been a case or two of cholera . . . more than I like," Henderson said. "Been isolating 'em a bit, but you know what it is—a case or two among the coolies, a couple of privates—nothin' much; but the reason I've come up is behind it all."

The smile died out of Richard's face; it grew grave, alert, absorbed. He sat upright, with a sudden tightening of all his muscles.

"That's bad," he said. "But what is the rest?"

"What about Kinloch? Never been through a cholera outbreak, has he?"

"No."

The word came rather sharply from Richard's lips, for he was thinking of Bobby Kinloch's bright face in the midst of the horrors of a cholera epidemic, and of another face so strangely like Bobby's. At the Colonel's next words, however, all thought fled except those strictly to do with the matter in hand.

"My idea is that the Ramdar Well has been poisoned."

"Poisoned? Why?"

The Colonel answered the question by another.

"Have you any particular enemy?"

Richard's eyes hardened. There flashed into his mind the memory of a certain afternoon shortly before his leave, when he had been disturbed by the visit of the fat down-country Mohammedan, Abdul Gharfur, and a recalcitrant small boy who objected to being vaccinated. He knocked the ash very carefully from the end of his cigarette.

"I am not quite sure. If I had, what good would it do for him to poison the Ramdar Well?"

"They've odd ideas sometimes. You know that as well

as I do. Anyway, you can think it over. You can take what steps you feel inclined."

A sudden idea struck Richard.

"Has Abdul Gharfur been over here lately?" he asked.

"Only once while you were away," Henderson replied—"came over to complain that his wife's uncle's sister's husband had taken a piece of his land, and was ploughing it—at least, that was the excuse, I believe. We've not had so much trouble as I expected—one or two brushes out Perānan way, and an Utman-Khel head-man killed. Otherwise it's been pretty quiet. How did you leave London?"

The talk switched off to home affairs, for the Colonel was hungry for news of his beloved Metropolis, and had a thousand questions to ask concerning it. Cavanagh's next visitor arrived just after Henderson had taken his departure, riding into the compound on a superb black mare. He dismounted, and walked up the steps into the verandah with the splendid carriage of his race—a man of sixty-two or three, well over six foot in height, magnificently built, with the clean-cut, handsome features and light skin of the high-bred Sikh. Indeed, his face was scarcely darker than Richard's own, and his whole appearance spoke strongly of his Aryan blood. Ramshar Khan announced him proudly.

"Ressaldar Ramadur Singh, Excellency;" and Cavanagh rose from his seat and held out his hand.

"Ah, Ressaldar Sahib, I am very glad to see you again at last!"

The old nobleman's eyes kindled, but he did not reply to the greeting in words till the door was closed and he had satisfied himself that Ramshar Khan had departed; then he spoke in a voice that thrilled with strong emotion.

"The light of my old eyes has returned to me, and I am content. Praised be God who hath brought it back to me!" He lifted his hands above Richard's head in blessing, then his white teeth gleamed in a smile.

"And so you have come back to Kultānn! It is good to see you, my son, and your presence is needed. You are well and rested?" His keen eyes searched Richard's face with loving anxiety, and what they saw did not quite satisfy them.

"Something has happened to trouble you," he said. "Things have gone ill with you. Is it not so?"

Richard met his glance and spoke quietly.

"Yes," he said; "and one day I will tell you of it, but not now."

"I will wait," was the answer. "And if my white hairs have brought me any wisdom, it is at your service. That you know."

Richard smiled a little.

"Yes, I know that more surely than I know anything else on earth," he said. "It's good to be back again. But I forget my messages. I met someone to whom your name is very dear. Can you guess whom?"

The old man shook his head, and Richard laughed.

"Someone who sent you the warmest greetings and a present," he said, opening one of his table-drawers. "See, here it is."

The old man's eyes were puzzled, but he was as delighted by the mystery as a child, and held out his hands eagerly.

"A present? There is but one other in all your England that would send me a present, and it is many long years since she went away. Give it to me, my son."

Richard handed him the packet and watched him draw a jewel-studded knife from his belt and cut the string and unfold the tissue-paper. Then he uttered a cry of surprise and joy, and spoke, with his face alight with pride and tenderness.

"It is she! My General's little daughter! It is the baby who lay in my arms and played with my beard—the little maid whom I trained to ride as a soldier should . . . and shoot as I myself shot! My little maid grown to this. . . . Hai mai! How the years have passed!"

He sat gazing at Evelyn's portrait, tracing the likeness to the child he had known and loved, and when he looked up his eyes were misty.

"And so you, my son, have met my little maid! And she has remembered me! All these long years! It seems that there are more faithful hearts than I guessed. Did she tell you of all the days we had together, my son? Did she say how she listened to the stories I told her when she sat on my knee with her fingers twined around my sword-hilt—this very sword that I touch now? Did she remember how she would fall asleep in these arms, with the bright gold of her curls against my beard? . . . It was black then, my son. Tell me, did she remember these things?"

He waited with almost painful eagerness for the reply, and Richard felt suddenly grateful to Evelyn.

"She spoke to me of all these things," he answered, "and among her dearest treasures is a jewelled clasp such as I have seen you wear . . . she says it was your gift to her . . . and she told me of the day when you rode all the way from Thāl to Peshawur, carrying her before you on your saddle, and the tribesmen's bullets fell around you both and harmed you not. She has forgotten nothing of all those days."

He broke off, for the old man's emotion touched him ; then he smiled.

"I too have a small gift to join hers . . . it is here."

He took out the heavy silver frame he had chosen, and fitted the photograph into it, and for a little the Ressaldar talked of Evelyn and those far-off days ; then, as the hour grew later, his conversation turned to the immediate past, and for a long while he spoke of Kultānn, and the Frontier, and of all that had happened during these last months ; and when at last he rose to go, Richard knew more about the unofficial welfare of his district than anyone else could have told him in a week.

He walked into the verandah with his guest, and stood by in the compound while he mounted, stroking Shireen's satin neck.

"In two days we shall meet again," he said. "Till then, good-bye !"

He watched the Ressaldar ride away, then went back to his office and sat for a while deep in thought. At last he rang the bell and summoned Ramshar Khan.

He came in at once, salaamed, and waited for what his master had to say. Richard looked at him, frowning.

"Listen !" he said. "I have much to say to you."

The man fixed his clear dark eyes on the grey ones that watched him, and waited patiently till Richard should seem ready to begin.

The limitless patience of the East, which for ever remains such a source of extraordinary mystery to the hurrying Western world, was typified as Ramshar Khan waited, his face calm and tranquil as a carving in ivory ; and Richard understood this, and did not hurry his thoughts. When they were quite clear, he dropped the dead stump of his cigarette into an ash-tray, and lifting his head, looked into the other's face.

"Ramshar Khan, do you remember a certain hot afternoon

a year ago, when Kinloch Sahib and I were getting out the report for the Commissioner Sahib's visit ? ”

“ Well do I, Sahib. It was the day on which some thrice-accursed murderer sought to take Your Excellency's life.”

“ Yes ; but it wasn't of that so much that I was thinking. Do you remember Abdul Gharfur and his little son ? ”

The man's face hardened ever so slightly, but Richard's keen eyes saw the tightening of the muscles in his hollow temples as he answered.

“ I remember, Sahib. They disturbed the heaven-born with their importunate pleadings, and the small son wept. . . . I remember too well, Sahib.”

Richard's steady regard did not waver, but his voice came sharply.

“ Why too well ? ”

The old Pathan's glance did not waver either, but an entreaty entered his eyes.

“ Will the heaven-born chide me if I speak freely ? ”

Richard's mouth relaxed a little.

“ Tell me what is in your heart, Ramshar Khan,” he said more gently.

“ It is dark, Sahib—dark and mysterious—but I think—nay, I am sure—Abdul Gharfur did not visit you for the purpose whereof he spoke. It was but an excuse—and in the night by stealth a shot was fired. Abdul Gharfur is an evil man, Sahib ; I would say to you that you should not trust him.”

For a minute or two Richard was silent, and the man's face grew anxious.

“ My Sahib is not angry ? ” he questioned humbly ; and something in the old man's tone made Richard look up quickly and meet his eager, loving eyes. He smiled suddenly, the quick, radiant smile that lit his face so wondrously.

“ Nay, not angry—only surprised. Why do such things come into thine heart ? ”

“ I know not ! ” the old man answered, with a little gesture of perplexity. “ This knowledge comes, Sahib, and I do not know from whence. Maybe I grow old, and yet, and yet—I am sure Abdul Gharfur hath done this thing ! ”

The Colonel's words about the Ramdar Well flashed into his mind ; he spoke with a certain knowledge of what the answer would be.

“ What thing ? ”

Ramshar Khan bent a little forward and lowered his voice.

"The well, Sahib! The Ramdar Well! Take care it is not used again, Sahib, for I swear it is not safe."

"I will remember," Richard answered, and the sternness came back to his face. "You will see that my orders are carried out, letter by letter, and that no water is brought from thence to this house. Now I have much writing to do. Be silent of all that I have said. Send Kinloch Sahib to me."

The old man bowed low and departed, and a minute or two later Kinloch entered the room.

"You wanted me, sir?"

"Yes. Bring the Report to me now, and then ride down to the club and ask Scott if he can come up. He's sure to be there at this hour."

The Report was full, and required more time than he had to give it just then, so he devoted himself to looking up his duties for the following day, and answering a few of the more important letters.

There was an outbreak of rinderpest amongst the cattle round Parachinwar, thirty miles away, and a piteous appeal from the Naib-takim in charge there, Ram Ullah, that some help should be sent to him in order that he could segregate the infected animals. He decided to visit Parachinwar and Ram Ullah without delay. Cholera—his face set grimly—had broken out at Perānan, a village twelve miles off in the other direction, and there were urgent appeals for medical assistance from the village head-man, who happened to be an unusually enlightened and sensible man. Thāl must be seen to at once also; cholera cases were showing themselves with ominous frequency. Then came half a dozen other matters which must be attended to, and Kinloch had booked for him; the matter of building a long-needed school at Perānan—that would have to wait till the cholera was stamped out—the usual small half-yearly grants to be paid for the upkeep of the wayside shrines, and a special grant to repair a matimkotah,* damaged by lightning, on the road to Thāl. Two malik† from the Hills had been disputing over the tenure of a certain plot of land—their case must be thoroughly looked into and dealt with as soon as might be, or there would be trouble, possibly bloodshed; while at Upper Parānan the register of births sent in by the village head-man, Wala Lal, showed an alarming decrease, whether from natural

* A Sikh mourning temple.

† Heads of tribes.

causes or incorrect reporting it was impossible to judge without further investigation, which must be specially made. There were many other matters to be seen to, but these were the most pressing, and Richard decided to visit Perānan on the morrow and see for himself what measures were necessary to stamp out the cholera, and if he had time on his return to hold the first hearing of the maliks' dispute. Therefore, while he waited for Scott, he set to work to gather what information he could from the wearisome tangle of wholly irrelevant details that the Naib-takim of Parachinwar had sent in; the maliks having first gone to him with the case.

It was getting on for eleven o'clock when Scott rode into the compound, hot and tired after a long day's work, and very glad to welcome his chief back again. In answer to Richard's questions anent the cholera, he shrugged his shoulders.

"We may keep it under for a bit," he said, "but we shall have it when the hot weather begins—certain of it. I'm going to test the water from the Ramdar Well—something wrong there. Lucky the new reservoir works are getting on so well. We shall get it opened in less than two years. Anyway, we've a few months before us to get ready in. You wanted to see me about Perānan, didn't you? Thought so. I was out there on Wednesday, and it's bad. Can't we start a dispensary there? It's needed badly."

"I know, but there's no money. The school at Parachinwar has been promised next. How about the chap at Perānan, though? Gotra Das, isn't he? He's asking for supplies at once. I shall go over there to-morrow myself. It's too near to be pleasant."

"Gotra Das? Yes. He's all right, but certainly he wants help. Native dispenser there as frightened as a cat, had to tie him up to keep him from bolting. That's all he's got, so no wonder the old chap's a bit worried. Your presence will hearten him up. A hundred cases and half a pint of cholera mixture between 'em! You know the kind of thing."

"Too well!" Richard said shortly. "Send me up the things by seven. You'll be here, I suppose?"

"No, I'm off to vaccinate 'em at Jallundar. They've been the very devil over it, curse 'em. All right! I'll have the supplies here punctually. What's Kinloch doing to-morrow? Can you send him with me?"

"Not possibly. He's on the reservoir at present. Why?"

"Representation of authority! By the way, what's become of the fat old chap who used to live there? Abdul something or other?"

"Abdul Gharfur?"

"Yes, that's it. He's disappeared! Vanished! Gone clean off the earth apparently."

Richard frowned.

"When was he seen last?"

"Six weeks ago. His wife's raging, and everybody in Jallundar's talking about it. I heard from your khitmutgar."

"That's curious. I hadn't heard of it. Well, you'll have the things here by seven?"

"Yes, without fail; and now I must be off. Good-night!"

He rose with a yawn.

"I've been at it since six, and have to go over to a coolie again to-night. It's very good to have you back, Cavanagh. Hope you'll find Perānan in a better state than you think."

"Hope so, I'm sure. Good-night!"

He was gone, and Richard turned his attention once more to the document the Naib-takim had sent him, but paused once to frown and stare at the opposite wall, for Abdul Gharfur's disappearance complicated matters in one direction, although it simplified them in another, and certainly pointed to his inculpation in the matter both of the bullet and the mysterious poisoning of the well. Yet nothing was certain; so it was this uncertainty that made Richard frown and wonder what the next move would be.

He rode to Perānan the next day, and found Gotra Das half distracted between his sick populace and his miserable Hindu dispenser, whom he had made prisoner to prevent his running away and leaving the stricken village to its fate. On his return in the evening, he interviewed the two maliks, and heard their dispute till his brain reeled; announced the day on which the case should be formally considered, and when judgment should be given; and rode back to his bungalow through the drenching wet and swamp—for the rains had broken—wondering what damage the rain would do to the more outlying districts and the hill villages.

At three o'clock he was awakened by a touch on the shoulder, and turned over to see Ramshar Khan by his side, tall and gaunt, in his long tunic and linen trousers.

"Sahib! Sahib! Wake up! The rains are heavy, and

the Kultanar overflows itself! The heaven-born's presence is needed speedily."

Richard was out of bed before he had finished speaking.

"Right! I will be there in a moment. What of Kinloch Sahib?"

"I go to wake him, heaven-born, without delay!"

The old man departed silently, and Richard hurried into his clothes. Hard work lay before him, not uncoupled with danger, if he would save property and life, and speed was of the utmost necessity. Barely five minutes had elapsed between the time of waking and his meeting Kinloch at the door, struggling into a mackintosh.

"Floods on the Kultanar, sir!" the latter cried cheerfully, as if that were the consummation of all his hopes. "By Jove! it is raining, isn't it?"

Side by side they plunged into the dense blackness without, hustling their horses through the torrential rain to the collection of huts and bazaars that formed the native city all lying on the river-bank, and just now a scene of wildest confusion.

As they rode down the sloping path, black water met them, swirling first round the horses' fetlocks, then their knees; and above the roar of the rain and the river came the shrieks of women and the wail of men.

Richard pulled up and turned to Kinloch.

"Get down by the ford and clear the houses round there. Drive the people up to the school—that'll shelter them. Where's the Ramdulla? Ah, there you are! Go down with Kinloch Sahib and get the cattle up to the new school compound; take half a dozen men with you. Ah!"

A flash of lightning, blue and jagged, glared through the blackness, revealing the wild scene for one precious moment; revealed, too, something that sent a light flickering in Richard's eyes, and an added sternness to his mouth.

"Where is the Doctor Sahib?" he said sharply.

"Here, Cavanagh!" shouted an answering voice. "Good old Noah's flood, isn't it?"

But Richard Cavanagh made no answer to the greeting.

"How many cases have you in hospital?" he asked sharply.

"Eight—nine."

"Get across to them, then, if the ford's still passable. Signal if you need help."

Scott rode off at a canter, and Richard urged his huge bay onward, till he was in the thick of the mêlée, directing, superintending, splashing hither and thither.

From the ford Kinloch's piercing police-whistle rang out twice, and Richard muttered a "Thank God!" for it meant the lower town was clear, and not a moment too soon, for the lightning showed the damage done, and the river was rising momentarily.

Kinloch, hot and panting, the rain trickling in runnels down his neck, splashed his way along the bazaar road nearest the bank, the water almost up to his horse's belly.

"All clear, sir!" he shouted, as he reached the spot where Richard was superintending the evacuation of a house by a wailing Hindu woman, who shrieked anew at the sight of the swirling water. "Hadn't you better get out, sir? There's no depending on anything now."

"In a moment. Here, take her!"

Richard passed a screaming brown baby into Kinloch's hands, and followed her up with an unwieldy bundle—all the poor mother's worldly possessions—backed his horse from the doorway, and drove the unwilling crowd of wailing people up the steep slope. Their progress was slow, for they were encumbered with all sorts of treasures, trying pitifully to save what they could, and it was impossible to leave them for a moment without fear of someone turning back to try and rescue a valued possession.

Kinloch, longing to gallop to the ford and assist the Ressaldar, who, like the rest of the officers, was working under the Colonel's direction, was forced to coax and drive the crowd up the slope to safety, and the shelter of the Fort and adjoining buildings; then, free at last, galloped off to find his chief.

In the glare of the incessant lightning he could see Ramadur Singh with half a dozen troopers rounding up some terrified sheep and cattle, and the crowds of the frightened natives swarming up the slope laden with household treasures; he whistled shrilly, and then sent his pony scuttering over the stones to Ramadur Singh's side.

"Where is Cavanagh Sahib?" he cried, with sudden fear at his heart. "Have you seen him, Ressaldar Sahib?"

The old man broke off in the middle of an harangue to his men; pallor spread over his face.

"Cavanagh Sahib is not with me. He went towards

the hospital. Kinloch Sahib, is he not in the bazaar, yonder? Quick, Sahib!"

He pulled his mare up almost on her haunches.

"Naidoo! take this crowd of helpless ones to the sheds by the Excellency's compound. Stay thou with them, and see that not one escapes, and presently I will come and count them. Now, Sahib, I am ready."

He swung his mare round, and side by side they headed for the bazaar; all around them was rushing water, torrential rain, the incessant glare of the lightning, and the frightened wail of the villagers. Then suddenly, above the pealing thunder and the rush of the rain, came a new sound, a lower note than all the rest, that caused Ramadur Singh to pull his mare up short.

"No farther, Kinloch Sahib! The river comes!"

Even as he spoke came a sudden shriek from a hut almost at the foot of the slope, and in the glare of the lightning they saw a woman on the roof, barely five feet above the water, and at the sight Kinloch's blood thrilled.

"Good Lord! She's been left behind!" he cried, and then, digging his spurs into the pony, rode him into the swirling flood.

A shout rang through the noise of wind and water as Richard cantered up to the Sikh's side, hatless, drenched, bleeding from a scratch on the cheek, but triumphant with success.

"Shahbash, Ressaldar Sahib, Shahbash!" he cried. "Why, what's the matter?" for the old Sikh turned a perfectly colourless face to his.

"A woman left behind—yonder at the bazaar corner. Kinloch Sahib hath ridden——"

Richard pulled his horse's head round, but the Ressaldar caught at his bridle.

"The river comes! Listen!" he cried hoarsely. "Not you, my son! Not you! Let me go instead."

The imploring agony of the old man's voice went to Richard's heart. He flashed him a quick smile.

"Nay, my father. Stay where you are! I shall be back in a moment, never fear."

A stifled wail rose to the old man's lips: "My son! my son!" But Richard was twenty yards away, urging his sweating, struggling horse through the deeper water to

where Kinloch, standing up in his stirrups, was striving to make the woman come down from the roof.

At his reassuring shout Kinloch turned to him in desperation.

"She won't come!" he cried hoarsely, and Richard grasped the situation at once.

Slipping and plunging, almost swept off his feet by the current, the horse came to a standstill by the wall, and Richard threw the reins to Kinloch, and scrambled on to the roof. The next instant he had the woman in his arms, and was lowering himself on to the saddle—a perilous task, for the waler was plunging and struggling—nearly losing his footing in the current, and terrified beyond measure.

Just as they plunged into the torrent a shriek rose from the bank, and in the lightning the face of the water whitened right across, then seemed to lift itself in a solid wall. Kinloch, unhampered by extra weight, snatched at his chief's bridle, trying to steady him, the roar in their ears deafened them, and the next instant the horses were swept off their feet, and fighting for their lives.

Richard kicked his feet free from the stirrups as the water bore down on him, lifting his shrieking burden as high as he could, and in the hell of the next moment kept his grip of the thick rope of hair till the fury of the water flung him almost by a miracle against an uprooted tree that had jammed against a hut.

There was a fierce struggle, a tumult of water—blinding, deafening, choking—then he felt firm ground beneath his feet, clutched at the wall above him, and fought his way inch by inch clear of the maddened river.

Out of danger on the sodden earth, he stooped to examine the woman. She gasped and coughed, and opened her eyes as the Colonel's great black charger galloped up through the mud, followed by an orderly. The Colonel swung himself from the saddle and caught Richard's hand.

"Thank God!" he cried hoarsely. "I never expected to see you alive again!"

"Where's Kinloch?" Richard panted, as soon as he had breath enough to speak, and the Colonel reassured him.

"Got to land just below the ford with the horses. Get up and ride straight home, or you'll be down with fever."

Richard shook his head, for his teeth were chattering violently, and he could hardly speak.

"Give me a stirrup," he said, and stumbled alongside of the huge charger, through what seemed an eternity of drenching rain and blinding lightning.

A shout greeted them as they re-entered the village, and a swarming crowd of coolies, sowars, and townspeople closed in upon them.

"Wah! wah! The Sahib is saved! Cavanagh Sahib is here! The Sahib argya!"*

But the Colonel waved them back as a shout rang above the tumult, and Kinloch pushed his way through the throng.

"Here I am, sir! safe and sound, and the horses are all right. Thank God, you're safe!"

"Yes—yes, I'm right enough. Is the lower town all clear?"

"Yes, everyone's out. Shall I go up and help the Colonel?"

"No. Go home and change, or you'll be down with fever. I'm coming. Where's Roy?"

He shouldered his way through the crowd, mounted the dripping horse, and rode off to the schools to see to the housing of his homeless people till the dawn.

It was six o'clock when he re-entered his bungalow, fit to drop from exhaustion and the fever that the long hours in drenched clothes had brought on, whereat Ramshar Khan prayed him to go straight to bed and dosed him with some native drug that produced a profuse sweat, and was followed by a sound sleep, after which Richard felt exceedingly limp, but quite fit to start work again.

* Has come.

CHAPTER X

" MERRY Christmas, sir ! "

" Merry Christmas, Cavanagh ! "

The Colonel and Bobby Kinloch both uttered their greetings heartily, and Richard laughed as he returned them.

" It looks like it, Colonel," he said. " Morning, Bobby ! So you're busy to-night, Colonel ? "

" Yes. This business with Mujjian Das—confounded old scoundrel as he is—has gone far enough. One of his men murdered a mail-runner last week, for no earthly reason but sheer devilry, and it's about time he was stopped. Going to send some men out against him to-night."

Bobby Kinloch turned wistful eyes on the Colonel's hard-featured face.

" Wish I could come with you ! " he murmured enviously, and went off to feed his bull-terrier, lamenting the cruel fate that had decreed him for the Indian Political instead of the Army.

The day was a cold one, with a bitter wind coming down from the snow-wreathed Hills ; and the mud-walled club-house was either stifling with the heat of the blazing wood fires or miserably cold, when any outer doors were opened.

Kinloch had been over at Parachinwar for two days, settling up some long-delayed business with regard to the making of a road. So it came about that he had not seen his chief till they met in the club-house at half-past three. At Kultänn the day had been much like other days, except that the Colonel read the Christmas collect very gruffly at morning service, to remind his hearers that it was Christmas Day, and one subaltern, receiving some unhappy-looking mistletoe from home, stuck it up in the club-house to give a festive air to the billiard-room.

Richard had been present at the service, and afterwards ridden round the bazaar to see that his odd collection of coolies and labourers were doing their work ; for, despite the weather, it was impossible to leave the village altogether as it had been after the flood, and repairs of a necessary sort were going on. Later, he was going home to look into one or two appeals that had been sent him, and to write directions to Gotra Das at Perānan—who, with his customary ill-luck,

was at present in great trouble over an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease among his few poor cattle—and he was now bound for a visit to the hospital, to cheer up the patients and inspect the buildings, as was his custom, and to see that all orders were being properly carried out.

He took Roy over to the hospital at an easy canter, and was met on the threshold by Scott, who gave him a cheerful "Happy Christmas!" as he swung himself from the saddle.

"Anything of importance going on? he asked, as they went into the building together. "No cholera cases?"

"No. None. We've stamped it out, I think."

Richard did not answer, for of that he had his doubts; but Scott expected no reply, and went on:

"Had a chap brought in day before yesterday with cancer of the bowel. I operated yesterday, but I'm afraid the poor beggar won't live . . . and I almost hope not. He's the only case that's worrying me just at present. I fancy he's got something on his mind, for he keeps trying to tell me something, and I'm hanged if I can make him out."

"Let me see if I can understand him," Richard answered, and Scott led him straight into the ward.

The man lay at the farther side of the small mud-walled room, a huge Pathan, wasted almost to a skeleton, still young in years, but with his full beard streaked with snow, and his face grey and drawn with agony. He rolled his black eyes up to Scott's face, and uttered a feeble sentence, then groaned and turned his head away. Richard put Scott aside and bent over the pallet, speaking in a vernacular that the Medical Officer did not understand; and, at the first word, the patient's eyes unclosed, and lit up with a great relief.

"My father, Sahib—at Perānan—an old man—but skilled—he will starve!"

He broke off, the perspiration standing in drops on his forehead. Richard knelt on one knee by the bedside to catch the feeble words.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, speaking with great distinctness, so that the dying man should understand. Scott held some brandy to his lips, and in its momentary strength he spoke more clearly.

"A blacksmith—I had Rs. 16 a month. It is saved. All saved. Rs. 118 in a blue cloth . . . under the rock shaped like a cross . . . on the road to Dera Shahr . . . by the

tower that belongs to Mujjian Das. To my father . . . he will starve, Sahib ! ”

The agony in the dying eyes went to Richard's heart. He spoke gently.

“ It shall be taken to him at once,” he said. “ Why did you put it there ? ”

“ I knew no one . . . would dare to rob . . . near that prince of thieves and murderers ! ”

The answer came with a flicker of amusement over the grey face ; he lay silent for a moment, paused to gather his strength, then beckoned Richard nearer.

“ I speak to Cavanagh Sahib . . . is it not so ? ” he panted, and Cavanagh nodded ; then, in response to the dying man's unspoken request, looked at Scott.

“ He wants to speak to me alone,” he said, and at once Scott moved away.

With a fearful effort, the man raised himself a little, and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

“ The saddle for the black mule is finished, Sahib . . . it lies . . . with the money . . . and it . . . fits well ! ”

He sank back with a gasp, and Scott came back quickly.

“ Poor devil ! ” he muttered under his breath, looking down at the huge, wasted form, and Richard nodded.

“ Yes . . . a fine chap ! ” And at the sound of his voice the dying man opened his eyes.

“ Excellency . . . yourself . . . you understand ? Yourself ? ” He panted. “ The word of a Sahib ? ”

Richard bent his head in a gesture of assent.

“ On the word of a Sahib,” he said very gently. “ Go in peace ! ”

As though the promise and the permission had loosed the last earthly bonds, the man fell back, his fingers loosening from Richard's arm, his face blanching.

Scott made a quick movement, then stopped, and suddenly the glazing eyes opened and sought Richard's, as though in the midst of the gathering darkness of death, the sight of that strong, pitiful face was a light and refuge.

For a moment they gazed, then the light in them went suddenly out like the flame of a lamp blown by a gust of wind, the jaw dropped, and Richard rose and turned away.

Scott walked by his companion's side in silence till they reached the door, then he spoke rather hurriedly.

"I say, Cavanagh, you're not going to that place till after to-night, are you?"

"I shall go up with the troops, but I'm going over to Perānan right away."

"Perānan? Now? But, man alive, it's after four, and getting dark!"

Richard glanced at his watch.

"So it is. I must be all the quicker, that's all. Send a boy down to the lines, will you? I want to borrow Shireen for the evening. Roy won't do the whole round so well. Good-bye. I must be off."

Scott laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You'll take the Ressaldar with you?" he said. "Good Lord, man! you'll never go alone, will you?"

A whimsical smile flashed over Richard's face.

"Why should I drag anyone else twenty-four miles for nothing?" he said. "I shall be all right. Good luck to you! Merry Christmas!" And, laughing cheerily at the mockery of the last words, he mounted and rode off at a canter to the lines.

Luckily he found the Colonel almost at once, and plunged into the business that had brought him.

"What's your plan for to-night?" he asked.

"To send the Goorkhas up the plain and get behind Dera Shah with the cavalry. Take 'em a wide détour."

"What time do you start?"

"Midnight—sharp."

"Right! Can you spare a couple of mounted men to meet me at one o'clock at the dak bungalow by the ford?"

The Colonel opened his eyes.

"Yes," he said. "What the deuce are you going to do there?"

"Go on somewhere else. It's only a meeting-place. Don't send a patrol. I don't want to be seen. What I want to do is to meet your men and do my work a mile or two away, and before the body of the troops gets up. Then they can see me back as far as the ford and follow you up. It's quite a peaceable quest I'm on. I don't expect to see a soul; but, considering all things, I thought it wiser to have some sort of an escort. Send me men you can trust."

"All right. Do you want the Ressaldar told?"

"No!" Richard said, rather curtly, and the Colonel

forebore to say more ; if the District Officer chose to risk his life for some idea of his own, it was none of his business.

"They shall be at the ford at one," he said. "If you want 'em, don't scruple to use 'em, we shall have enough with the others . . . sixty of the finest native cavalry in the world ! Good luck to your business whatever it is !"

"Thanks !"

Richard wrung his hand and rode off through the bitter air leaving the Colonel perplexedly pulling his moustache.

Rather to Richard's surprise, there was only a message from the Rissaldar, to the effect that his magnificent black mare, and everything else belonging to him, was at the Sahib's service, but that he himself had gone to visit a friend, for which he sorrowed greatly ; so ten minutes later Richard rode out of the compound on his twelve-mile ride to Perānan, his mind busy over the business ahead of him, and his eyes alert for any enemy. Once, cantering easily along the rough road, he thought he caught the sound of hoofs behind him, but when he pulled up to listen, all he heard was the desolate sigh of the wind coming down from the hills, and the laugh of some jackals poking about the rocks near at hand.

He reached Perānan after dark, and spent two hours trying to trace the man he had come to help, finding him at last by the aid of Gotra Das in a miserable little mud hovel, shaking with cold and half starved. He wept as he heard of his son's death, for he was very weak, and wept anew when he learnt that the Excellency had come to help him then and there.

Richard left him, shortly before eleven, warmed, fed, and housed with the son of Gotra Das, who was zaildar* for his own village and half a dozen others round about, as well as official head-man of Perānan ; and the old man was hysterical with gratitude.

Time was getting on, but Richard was obliged to take his course slowly across the three miles that separated Perānan from the ford where he was to meet his escort, for the ground was rough and the track through the swampy fields very narrow. As he emerged on to the road that ran straight into Mujjian Das' territory, he heard the hoofs again, and wheeled round to meet his pursuer, ready to fire, then uttered a sharp exclamation, and slipped his revolver back into his

* Zaildar : an unofficial position of head of group of villages, or *zails*.

pocket, for the Ressaldar, mounted on a grey Arab stallion, belonging to one of the native officers, galloped up, and flung out his hands in brief apology.

"My son, forgive me! But I knew the danger, and you are reckless! So reckless! Your pardon, Cavanagh Sahib."

It was useless to say anything now, and Richard, who had only wanted to spare him needless danger, did not attempt to do so.

"There is no need to speak of recklessness, Ressaldar Sahib," he said, and laughed softly—the low laugh of boyish enjoyment in an adventure. "Well, as you're here, we'll get on to the ford."

Side by side they wheeled to the left and rode in silence till they were descending the slope to the ford; then, in a few brief sentences Richard explained what he was going to do, and even as he finished they came to a halt and found the two troopers the Colonel had promised, waiting under cover of an overhanging rock.

Richard gave his orders, and riding with extreme care, the little party crossed the ford and commenced the climb to the watch-tower of which the dead man had spoken.

Sleet had begun to fall, driving along on the bitter wind, stinging the faces and blinding the eyes, so that the men rode with frowning brows, and the horses bent their heads, while the cold, growing more intense as the night advanced, pierced to the very marrow.

Suddenly, coming upon the wind, high above its sighing rush, rose a long-drawn wailing cry, that rose and fell through the darkness, now near, now seeming to come from the far-off hills themselves. Richard reined up his horse, but the Ressaldar at his side shook his head.

"'Tis not human, Cavanagh Sahib. Thou canst do nothing."

"Nothing human?"

Even in his surprise and horror at the appallingness of the cry over that dreary waste, Richard did not raise his voice above a whisper, and the words had hardly passed his lips before one of the troopers reined up alongside and saluted.

"It is often thus, Sahib. Hast thou never heard it before?"

Richard stared at the grizzled face beside him, shadowy and statuesque in the darkness.

"Never, Mir Khan. What is it?"

"King Safed Deo, Sahib," the man answered composedly. "Long ago all this country was the land of devils, and he was their king, till one night Two Brothers came out of the North and conquered and drove him out—Shudani and Budam. Now, on winter nights of storm, he cries thus. Listen! Ah, he has ceased!"

The cry died away as it had risen, and for the first moment Richard felt an undeniable thrill of sheer nerve-paralyzing fear, then squared his shoulders and threw up his head.

"To-night we have to listen for the living, not the dead," he said. "Right wheel!"

They turned abruptly, leaving the rough track and striking up the naked hillside till they reached another track, wider and rougher than the last. Here Richard reined in and moved his horse carefully a few steps to the left. Before him rose a pile of rocks, and two of them stood in the form of a rude natural cross. He checked an exclamation and dismounted giving his reins to the Ressaldar; then, beckoning one of the troopers to help him, he began cautiously to lift away the pile of stones that lay around the foot of the cross.

For half an hour the two worked till their hands were sore and bleeding, and every muscle ached; then Richard's arm went into an aperture, and after a moment's pause he drew out a small, roughly-made bag of blue native cloth, and knew that his task was finished.

All this while the Ressaldar and Mir Khan, the elder of the troopers, had sat motionless as statues, their keen eyes piercing the blackness, their ears strained to catch the faintest sound. But now Mir Khan suddenly leapt from the saddle with the agility of a boy, and put his ear to the ground. A moment later he glanced at his officer and then at Cavanagh.

"Mount, Sahib; mount and ride. There are men closing in on two sides of us. Down the hill to the right, Sahib."

Richard tucked the precious bundle safely away, and gathered up his reins, only pausing to ask one question.

"Is it not our own men, Mir Khan?"

"No, Sahib. They are men barefoot—Afghans—and they are two hundred strong. Ride for your life, Sahib!"

To hesitate would be foolishness, and Richard obeyed, following Mir Khan's lead without another word, and before they had reached the bottom of the hillside a wild yell rose behind them and to their left, followed by the crackle of

rifles, and the phut, phut, of bullets in the soft earth around them.

The horses went gallantly, but neither Shireen nor the Arab stallion were fresh, and after a little it became evident that the Afghans were gaining on them.

Ramadur Singh turned to Richard with a sharp word of command.

"Faster, Cavanagh Sahib! Faster! Lay thy hand by his ear thus!"

He laid his fingers on the stallion's neck, and as Richard followed his example, the mare leapt forward with a splendid spurt, and for a mile or two farther they held their own; then one of the troopers uttered a groan, and his horse stumbled as he dropped the reins.

Richard glanced at him, but he took the reins in his right hand, and spoke between clenched teeth.

"'Tis but the arm, Sahib. All is well."

"We should be meeting the troops soon," Richard muttered, trying to pierce the darkness and rain. "It is after the time."

They thundered on across a stretch of ploughed land, the crack-crack of the rifles behind them, the roar of the wind and rain, and the laboured breathing of the horses in their ears, the men leaning low in their saddles, Richard's face set in its grimmest lines.

"The black mule's saddle" was evidently known to their pursuers, and he smiled a little, even then, as he thought of the incriminating document tucked into an inner pocket, to be filed presently as "information received."

Suddenly Mir Khan's mare coughed, stumbled, and plunged heavily forward, bringing her rider to the earth with her, and Richard reined up. This was the end.

To the left lay a steep slope of rocky ground, and he wheeled under its shelter; the Ressaldar caught his bridle.

"Cavanagh Sahib, go on! They do not know how many of us there be. Go, go!" he cried, anguish in his tone; but Richard turned on him like a flash.

"Nay, nay, Ressaldar Sahib. All together or none at all, and Mir Khan's mare is dead. Wheel under cover if you can, and pick your men."

Behind them rose the bare hillside, before them the curtain of black night and driving rain, and in their ears was the yell of their enemies and the crisp rattle of rifles.

A bullet grazed Richard's shoulder, soaking his coat with blood, a second carried away Mir Khan's turban, not injuring a hair of his head; then the yelling horde broke through the darkness, and the four men were fighting for their lives.

Evidently only a few had rifles, or they could not have held out two minutes, but the murderous Afghan knives flashed in the blackness, and the cruel bearded faces, lusting for blood, closed in upon them. For a minute they hesitated to attack, for the troopers, rifle to shoulder, fired with deadly accuracy and no haste, and the Englishman's revolver grew hot in his hand; then a tall, evil-smelling Afghan rushed at Shireen, and the mare, rearing, trampled him in the stomach, even as Ramadur Singh's revolver dropped, and he sank to his knees with a groan.

The sight of one of their enemies prostrate acted like fire to gunpowder, and with a yell they swooped down on the gallant little group; but the sight that had fired them, transformed Richard to a raging madman, drunk with lust for blood. He knew not if the Ressaldar were killed, but the sound of the old man's groan drove all coherent thought from his brain, rolled centuries of civilization from his shoulders, and left him a primeval savage, blind with rage and mad for slaughter.

He was not quite clear about it afterwards, but suddenly, through the hell of flashing knives and bearded faces, through the red mist of blood that seemed to hang like a curtain before his eyes, a sound struck on his ears—a curious, shrill, high sound, that pierced the yelling and the roar of the wind.

“Ulu—lu—lu—lu!”

The squeal came down the hillside, and the Afghans turned to fly—too late, for into their very midst, with clicking of kukris and that curious, squealing cry, came a rush of green-coated Goorkhas.

The squeal, the trample of feet, the yells of the enemy melted into one roar that in its turn died into silence, and Richard pitched forward across Ramadur Singh's body, even as the cavalry, delayed by a flooded stream, galloped over from the left, Mujjian Das a prisoner in their midst.

A sharp thrill of pain through his shoulder roused Richard, and he found himself lying on the stones, propped up against a rock, and gazing into Colonel Henderson's anxious eyes.

“What the deuce——”

He broke off and swore anew, and the anxiety left the old soldier's face.

"That's better. I was just wondering when you'd come round."

Fear shot into Richard's eyes.

"How's the Ressaldar?" he asked sharply. "Have the devils killed him?"

A voice from the darkness on his right answered him—a voice that was feeble but reassuringly cheerful.

"Nay, Sahib, not yet. 'Twas but a blow that stunned me."

Richard gulped down some brandy the Colonel offered him, then rose to his feet, swayed and steadied.

"I'm all right now," he said. "Fit to ride?—Absolutely! We're off at once?—That's excellent, for I shan't be sorry to get into some dry clothes."

The ride back to Kultänn, however, for all his cheerfulness was no pleasant thing, for his wounded shoulder ached villainously, he was drenched to the skin, and deadly tired; but the men were triumphant, and Mujjian Das was a prisoner in their midst, tied up with a dead horse's bridle, and swearing volubly; so the discomfort of the expedition had a noble reward, and everyone was satisfied.

When Richard woke, late the next morning, he was burning with fever and aching from head to foot; so he took a stiff dose of quinine, and was just going to turn over and go to sleep again, when he saw his letters lying close at hand, and on the top of the pile a rose-coloured envelope.

The sight set the blood galloping through his veins and his head swimming. He tore open the envelope, and leant on one elbow to read the letter, his lips parted, his breath coming unsteadily.

It was not long:

"Norman is all right again," Violet wrote. "He has never mentioned your name to me, and we see very little of one another. I am glad I did not come with you, Richard, for my duty is here . . . and yet I do not know how long I can bear it. Perhaps one day I shall come to you if you love me still. Do you love me as much as ever, I wonder? I lie awake at night and think of you all those thousands of miles away, and I long to take you in my arms and comfort you. Do you remember our last drive together? Tell me you love me, and that if I come you will be ready."

Richard crunched the paper against his burning lips, its fragrance mounting to his brain like wine.

"Love you?" he muttered hoarsely, his eyes devouring the words hungrily. "Love you! Do I still love you? Oh, my God!"

He dropped his head down on the letter and lay trembling, till he was roused by a footstep, and saw Bobby Kinloch standing near his bed.

The envelope lay on the coverlid, and he saw it, but paid no heed till he saw his chief's face, and then his eager inquiry died to silence, for he had never seen him thus before.

Despite the burning fever, despite the storm of passion and longing that was raging within him, Richard had himself in hand even as the younger man stammered and halted, and stood with wide-open blue eyes, staring at him.

"What's up, Bobby?" he said. "Did you see a ghost?"

With an effort Kinloch recalled his self-command and laughed uncomfortably.

"No. Why? I came to see if you were better, sir."

Richard yawned and shook his head.

"No . . . head's aching like the deuce. Oh, it's only the usual old thing. I shall be all right in an hour or two, after Scott's seen to this confounded shoulder of mine."

The curious fear was dying out of Kinloch's eyes, and he came a step nearer.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

Richard gave him one of his rare bright smiles.

"No, thank you, Bobby. I shall soon be better. Don't worry about me."

He settled himself and closed his eyes; so, taking the hint, Kinloch went away, and after a little, when the words ceased to swim before his eyes, Richard finished reading Mrs. Leighton's letter.

"And now I am going to ask you something, Dick, and I don't know how to do it . . . and yet I must. Oh, my darling, do forgive me, but I have no one but you, and no one else to turn to. Richard, I'm in a horrible fix! I want £300, and I haven't got a penny! I daren't let Norman know—besides, I cannot take his money, and this is an old matter. You know how little he gives me. Oh, I am so ashamed to write all this! What will you think of me? It's so sordid, isn't it? So miserable and belittling; and yet, dearest, what

can I do? Whom can I turn to? Oh, if I were only with you, and safe and happy! Forgive me; don't despise me! It is all my own fault, too; I am reckless and extravagant, and now this money is promised, and I have not got it. Oh, Dickie, what can I do? Help me, and forgive me.

"VIOLET."

Despise her? How little she understood him! He laughed softly to himself, then groaned to think of her unhappiness, and fear, and piteous loneliness. If he could only take her in his arms, and shield her, and guard her; if only he might comfort her and make her forget she had ever known worry, or fear, or misery, he would be content to ask nothing more of life or eternity.

For an hour he lay there, the rose-coloured letter crushed between the pillow and his cheek; then he heard voices and footsteps, so pushed the envelope far under his pillow, and waited for Scott to come in the room.

The wounded shoulder, of which he had spoken so lightly to the Colonel and Kinloch, caused Scott to frown and swear as he examined it afresh.

Richard looked at him with a half-bored, half-humorous smile.

"What's up now?" he said. "Isn't it doing what you want? It's only a flesh-wound."

"It's gone precious near finishing you, flesh-wound or no flesh-wound!" Scott retorted. "Another quarter-inch, and your troubles would have been ended. Good Lord, man, what luck you've got!"

"Well, hurry up and finish with it!" Richard exclaimed. "I've tons of work to do. Oh, hang it all! Leave that beastly thermometer alone, man! Yes, I know my temperature's 104! What else d'you expect it to be? Chuck the quinine over here, and tell Kinloch I'll be in presently."

Scott finished the dressing quite unperturbed.

"Indeed, and I shall do nothing of the kind!" he said equably. "You'll stay exactly and precisely where you are till I've seen you again. Oh, yes, you can have the quinine, as much as you want, but you don't stir from this bed this side of twenty-four hours. D'you hear? Now go to sleep!"

With that Richard was obliged to be content, and, indeed, it was several days before he was doing work again, and

nearly a month before his wound completely ceased to trouble him.

During all that time of convalescence he was obliged to leave many things to his subordinates, and, consequently, he had more time to himself than usual in which to think and plan. One thing was puzzling him exceedingly, and the more he tried to think it over, the more perplexing it became—namely, the source of the knowledge that had led the Afghans to the ruined tower on the road to Dera Shahr. It was no chance that Mujjian Das's men had descended on him—of that he was absolutely certain. Someone had told the robber-priest that he would be there, alone and helpless, and on that information Mujjian Das had acted. The thing that was so puzzling Richard was the identity of that same someone, unless it were possible that it could be Abdul Gharfur. In so far as he could remember he had spoken of his plans only to the Colonel; not even to Scott had he given any details, and the Colonel was, of course, out of the question. No one had followed him, of that he was certain; yet in some mysterious way his movements had been watched, his plans known, and himself been within an ace of death in consequence.

The more he thought the matter over, the more inexplicable did it become.

It was characteristic of him that he did not say a word to anybody of his suspicions, and, after a while, in the press of work that the approaching resettlement of the district brought, the whole occurrence faded somewhat from his memory, and he ceased to puzzle over it.

In February came Mrs. Leighton's acknowledgment of his loan—a short, pathetic little letter, which he carried in an inner pocket till it grew frayed and crumpled; and in the early spring also, on Easter Day, came his first letter from Evelyn, a long, delightful epistle, full of interesting news, and the hundred and one little details that are so precious to anyone separated by thousands of miles from their own country, and with it came a letter from Nancy, telling him of the advent of Robin Hood, a new pony, the conclusion of Sir Rupert de Lisle's adventures, and the gist of a new story, this time of the French Revolution, and replete with awful horrors.

Reading the two letters, this Easter Day, he saw himself back at Pangley, and dropped into a day-dream, gazing at the opposite wall, and fancying he could see the square old

house standing in its quiet gardens. Surely in a moment he would hear children's laughter, and see Nancy's slim figure tearing to meet him across the grass.

It was afternoon, with the pale, clear sunlight of early October falling athwart the gardens, and the sunshine was streaming in at the open window, and gilding even the fir-trees with a pale golden light. . . . How quiet it was ! with only the gentle rustle of the falling leaves to break the silence, and, after a while, the soft sound of a woman's dress and a light footfall.

With a violent start Richard came back to everyday life, roused, and, realizing where he was, sat upright, passing his hand over his forehead, a dazed look in his eyes, conscious that he had been dreaming—imagining—what you will—with extraordinary vividness, conscious, too, of a most curious sense of disappointment and depression.

He felt like a man who has a door, which he thinks to enter, suddenly slammed in his face ; and something of the same resentment took possession of him. He was by no means a fanciful man ; his life was too arduous for that, and this curious obsession—for such it surely was, being altogether outside his own control—annoyed him exceedingly. This Easter afternoon was the second time it had happened : the first being on that last day at Pangley, when he had stood at the end of the long path leading to the children's garden, and seen Evelyn Chetwynde standing there, the chequered sunlight on her hair, the tawny chrysanthemums in her hands, and above her head the overarching branches of the Japanese plane-trees.

What did it mean ? What was its reason ? He felt like a child confronted with some insoluble problem, which yet it cannot leave alone, and all day long it lay at the back of his brain, and irked him.

Later in the summer came another letter from Violet Leighton, and this time there was a second appeal for money. Richard sent her a cheque, and lay awake at nights, thinking of all she meant to him, praying wildly, passionately, for a chance to give her all she needed, and save her from every trial and danger.

The hot weather came, and with it an order from the Imperial Government to reduce unnecessary expenditure, whereat Richard, and Scott, and Kinloch raged and stormed, and were full of bitter and unavailing wrath, and the works

on the much-needed reservoir which was nearly completed were shut down for want of funds.

"Five thousand men turned off, and the whole thing within an ace of completion!" Kinloch cried. "We've worked at it for three years, and it could have been opened this autumn! Think of it! Wasted! Wasted, every bit of it! Oh, damn! damn! damn! and all through that fool of a brother-in-law of mine, and his eternal questions in the House about unnecessary expense in the North-Western Provinces. What the deuce has he suddenly turned his interest to the Indian Empire for? He used to be keen on the unhousing of the rich, or the Aliens' Aid Bill, or some such rot. And now he's been braying about the expense of our Indian Empire, and the way the money is wasted on unnecessary luxuries! Luxuries! Oh, lord!"

"It's good-bye to the official dispensaries at Perānan and Kana Dan," Scott said, knocking out his pipe on his heel. "Nice lookout for us now if the cholera comes. Reduce unnecessary expenditure? Good God!" he burst out fiercely. "Unnecessary! What do they think we're made of?"

"My dear chap, they don't think at all," Richard said, with a bitter little laugh. "It doesn't matter to them at home if the water-supply is inadequate, or the cholera depopulates a few thousand acres! It's a great deal more important to encourage all the scum of Europe to come to England, and to spend half a million on housing and feeding them! Why spend such a sum over a remote place like the North-West Frontier of India? Give the country back into the hands of those to whom it belongs! India for the Indian born. What right have we to oppress the native and enforce our harsh rule on a suffering people? It's Party government, not Imperial. Oh, curse them! I wish I had the chance of making them see and feel for themselves!"

He bit on his pipe savagely, and fell to silence, his face grimly set, his brows drawn together, his heart full of bitterness against the man who was misleading ignorant people in order to gratify his own private revenge.

Scott spoke again, leaning back in his chair and striking his closed fist on its arm.

"The hospital at Parachinwar is in debt, the staff wants increasing, and the sanitation is hopelessly bad. I'd been hoping to get that seen to before the rains."

"Talking of that, it's pretty bad here. Yet I was going to get it in hand. God help us if the cholera comes!"

"And the school that's been promised at Perānan—that's half built!" Kinloch cried. "Let alone the railway extension! I suppose that's off now, and Heaven knows if it'll be ever touched again—damn them!—why can't they leave it to us—what do they know?—oh—damn!"

His voice broke, and he dropped his head on his arm, and sobbed with sheer rage.

There was a moment's silence, then Richard reached out and patted his shoulder.

"Don't break your heart over it, Bobby!" he said kindly. "We've just got to face it out! You'll get used to it after a bit. One takes it hard at first, but it's no good. Cheer up, old chap!"

Kinloch lifted his face.

"It's so utterly unnecessary!" he cried passionately. "Oh, it's easy enough for them to talk comfortably at home, with their clubs, and their dinners, and their petty little aims, but we—here—we've got to face it all—we've got to see the country crying out for what it needs, and say 'No!' when it asks for help. It's heart-breaking; it's damnable! and it's Vi's husband at the bottom of it all! Hanged if I don't write and ask her to stop him!"

Richard knew what he was feeling, and could sympathize, but it was Scott who spoke first.

"We all feel the same, Bobby," he said; "but it's no good pulling oneself to bits over it. All the grieving and swearing in the world won't help us. We've merely got to face what we've faced before, and readjust matters a bit. Where's the last medical report? May I look over it?"

The dry common sense of his tone and words pulled the boy together; he went at a nod from his chief to fetch the report.

As the door closed behind him, Richard looked at Scott.

"He's badly hit over it," he said. "It's confoundingly rough luck on a youngster like that. And he's a good little chap, the best I could wish for."

"He'll get over it," Scott said shortly. "It's harder on you."

"Me? Oh, I'm used to it! Thank goodness, one does get used to it! But I took things harder when I first came out, and I know what it feels like."

Scott smoked in silence for a minute or two, then he took his pipe out of his mouth, and spoke.

"Lucky we don't go in for famines up this part of the world," he said. "When does the resettlement commence?"

"Next month. Nice old job it will be, too. Heard anything of Abdul Gharfur yet?"

"Not a word! Have you?"

"No. Odd how he disappeared."

There was another silence, then Kinloch re-entered with the medical report, and Scott plunged into it, and talked no more.

When Scott had gone, and Kinloch was asleep, two hours later, Richard re-read his letter of instruction, and sat for a long time without moving, gazing into vacancy, with frowning brows and close-shut lips, the letter lying loosely between his fingers, his brain busy with the uncomfortable thought that in some way or other this disconcerting news was the result of individual hatred. Never before had he been in any way interfered with, and it annoyed him now far more than he admitted, even to himself.

He lifted the letter again, and glanced at it.

"Unnecessary expenditure . . . some slight dissatisfaction with regard to the assessment for Parachinwar. . . . Maybe as well to leave the matter connected with the railway extension alone for the present. . . ."

"For the present!" Richard laughed shortly, flung the letter on his table, and plunged his hands in his pockets. What the devil did they expect?

Ramshar Khan, coming in softly at one o'clock, cast an anxious glance at the back of his master's head, then ventured a soft:

"It grows late, Sahib."

"What? Ah, yes, I suppose it does. You have fastened up?"

"Yes, Sahib."

Richard nodded, gathered together some papers, and went to the door. "Call me at six," he said. "To-morrow is a busy day."

The resettlement of the Kultānn Valley commenced in earnest in the spring, with the help of an Assistant-Deputy-Commissioner from Simla, and half a dozen native officials, and with the resettlement had come the hot weather.

One afternoon in the middle of April Richard rode into

the compound, flung the reins to the man who ran forward, and went up the steps into the house, wiping his forehead and calling loudly for a drink. The heat had come, and the big office, where Kinloch was working with two native clerks, was stifling, and as Richard opened the door the hot air met him, like a blast from infernal regions.

Kinloch looked up.

"Will you look through these papers now, sir, or later?"

"What are they?" Richard inquired, crossing to his table.

"Record of rights for the upper valley and tenure records."

"I'll do it after dinner. I'm due at the ford now. Have you touched the pedigree tables from Jallandur district yet?"

"Not yet. It's rottenly hot in here."

Richard nodded.

"It's worse outside. Mir Khan, have you finished the copying?"

"Yes, Sahib."

One of the native clerks handed over a blue paper, and Richard stood a moment to read it, his head a little bent, one hand holding the paper, the other tapping a riding-whip against his boot, his face tanned and burnt with the fierce sun, his khaki riding-breeches and coat grey with dust; and Bobby Kinloch, leaning back for a moment's rest, watched him intently.

After a minute or two he handed the paper back.

"Yes, that's all right," he said curtly. "Now do the other papers, and get them ready to send off. Kinloch, I shall be in about six."

He turned round and strode from the room, met the khitmutgar in the hall with his drink, paused to take it from him, went into his study, and, throwing aside his riding-switch sat down at his table for a moment, and frowned over a map of the district, while the tall glass stood unheeded by his side.

When he had satisfied himself over a certain point, he reached out his hand for the glass, and drank the contents, still gazing at the map, then got some papers out of a drawer, laid them ready for his return, and spent the next hour going through some important accounts that must be sent off by the mail that night. When they were done he wrote two official letters, put them ready for the mail, looked at his watch, and went into the hall.

Roy was waiting for him, and as he mounted Ramshar Khan came out of the house.

"Are you going far, Sahib?" the man asked, stroking the mare's satin neck. "'Tis evil in this heat. Pardon thy servant for asking."

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"I go to the ford. The heat must be put up with. Why—what is it?"

The Pathan was glancing uneasily at the sky, over which hung a curious yellowy haze.

"There is evil abroad, Sahib. . . . I think we shall have an earthquake."

Richard's brows drew together sharply. Storm, flood, danger from man and beast—for all these he cared nothing; but the earthquakes that visit the whole country along the foot of the hills filled him with a sick horror, at which not even Bobby Kinloch guessed. He acknowledged to himself that the khitmutgar was probably right—he had seen that look in the sky before; then, his face rather more set and stern than usual, he rode out of the compound, and set off to the ford two miles away to inspect the work on the new road that was in process of making above flood-level, in place of the one that had been washed away on the night of the great flood just after his return from England.

That done, he turned off to visit the band of men who were busy surveying and making notes for maps of all the cultivated land north of the river, in charge of Raynes, the Lahore man, who greeted him with a curse at the heat, which Richard heartily echoed.

All was going on satisfactorily there, and he sat for a moment talking to him, his keen eyes ranging the sun-baked fields and noting every man's work, then, with a last injunction, he rode away back to Kultänn, wondering if such a thing as coolness ever existed. On the outskirts of the town he met Captain Mellishe, who was going to the parade-ground, and drew rein on seeing him.

"I say, Cavanagh, who the blazes has been telling fairy-stories of good sport in this God-forsaken country?"

Richard pushed up his white hat, and sat back in the saddle.

"Why? What are you talking about?" he asked.

Mellishe looked at him curiously for a moment, then flicked some dust from his horse's shoulder.

"There's an Englishman come up to-day for the shooting."

"Shooting? *Shooting?*" Richard echoed. "Why, what sort of a fool wants to come here for shooting? What's he think he's going to shoot?"

Mellishe laughed.

"Heaven only knows! Polar bears, I should imagine. Well, I must be off."

Richard jammed his hat rather savagely over his eyes.

"Fancy anyone choosing to come at this time of year!" he said. "What's his name?"

Captain Mellishe gathered up his reins.

"It's Kinloch's brother-in-law, Leighton. See you to-night at the club!"

He rode off without waiting for a reply, but for a moment Richard sat perfectly still; then he tightened his reins, and cantered home.

In the shade of one of the trees by the western wall, Ramshar Khan was sitting with the child of one of the native officers on his knee, while he sang him a rhyme in a voice marvellously soft and clear:

This is a handful of cardamoms,
This is a lump of ghi!
This is millet and chillies and rice
A supper for thee and me!

The small boy shrieked with joy, and Richard's hard-shut lips softened a little, for he was always tender with children; then Ramshar Khan, catching sight of him, put the boy off his knee, and came across the courtyard as a groom ran forward to lead Roy away.

It was well after five as Richard entered the house, and at six he had to visit the Court-house and preside at the trial of a man arrested for woman-stealing; and, bidding Ramshar Khan let no one disturb him, he shut himself into his study.

The news he had just heard amazed and infuriated him; the absurdity of coming to Kultänn for the shooting was so palpable that it roused anger, and he knew that it was intended to do so. In a hidden pocket of his coat, close against his breast, lay Violet Leighton's last letter. Why had she said nothing of her husband's departure for India? What did Leighton intend to do?

He laughed a little at his inability to do anything. His coming would prove a futile thing, and Richard could not see what he hoped to accomplish by it ; yet he was quite aware that there might be trouble in store, for it is always unwise to underestimate an enemy's strength. He was just rising to go to the Court, when a sudden thought struck him, and, turning back to the table, he unlocked a drawer and read the Commissioner's last letter.

There was something about it that puzzled him a little ; a hint of dissatisfaction, a slightly dictatorial tone ; a suggestion that the District's returns were not quite all they should be ; a question as to his wisdom in several administrative questions.

Richard read the letter through twice, and swore under his breath. Was this, could this, be indirectly Norman Leighton's work ? He stuffed the letter in his pocket, and stood for a moment gazing unseeing in front of him, turning various things over in his mind.

He could not shut his eyes to the unsatisfactory way in which his work and methods were being criticized. For some months past he had felt that he was being regarded in no very friendly spirit by the powers that be. He could not account for the change and, characteristically, he had not worried over it ; but now the position assumed an entirely new importance, and his face was very grave as he walked across the compound and down to the mud-walled Court-house, with its corrugated iron roof, in which he must sit for two hours enduring the appalling heat as best he might.

The case was a serious one, and he was forced to give judgment against the culprit, who cursed him in bastard Hindustani as he was led off by two stalwart policemen to march to the gaol at Parachinwar, twenty miles away.

The stifling heat had increased as Richard emerged into the night and made his way back to his bungalow to dress before going down to the lines ; and he realized he was horribly tired, and that he would be lucky if he got to bed by one in the morning. The Colonel's bungalow was lighted up, and Henderson came forward to welcome him, then turned back to another guest who stood beside the door.

"Mr. Leighton, you know Mr. Cavanagh, I think you said. Mr. Richard Cavanagh—Mr. Norman Leighton."

For a moment the two men faced one another, and in both their minds was the memory of their last meeting ;

then Richard bowed, uttered a formal acknowledgment of the introduction, and turned to the Colonel, who stood close by, while Leighton began talking to Curtis.

Mellishe, who was among the guests, had watched the meeting curiously, for he remembered well enough the gossip that had been rife in London, and he could hardly choose but think that Leighton had some ulterior motive in coming to such a place as Kultänn.

The evening passed off quietly enough, with no hint being visible of the enmity that existed between the two principal guests, and when it was over, Richard bade his host good-night and walked back to his bungalow through the hot, thick darkness, going over the whole situation in his mind very carefully. Accustomed to judge men more by their looks than by their words, he was now quite certain that Leighton was set upon his ruin if he had the power to encompass it, no matter how difficult that way might be. It behoved him, then, to be careful, and, purely as a matter of habit, he slipped his hand into his pocket and let his fingers rest on the butt of his revolver. He was not in the least deceived by Leighton's polite greeting nor by the apparent frankness with which he spoke of his desire to travel to Chitral before returning to England.

The Colonel, hospitable as all Europeans are in that lonely Province, was pleased at his arrival, while the fact that Bobby Kinloch was his brother-in-law had in itself made his advent welcome, for Kinloch was a great favourite, and nothing was more natural than that, while in India, Leighton should pay a visit to his wife's brother.

Richard reached the wall of his bungalow, dimly seen in the starlight, and saw, too, at the same moment a dark form move in the shadow of the wall. Speculation was banished in an instant, and he whipped out his revolver, whereupon the dark figure slipped by him, and vanished in the shadows beyond the building, and Richard walked on and into the house.

He found Kinloch alone, working steadily, and, realizing that he must know immediately of his brother-on-law's arrival, he went up to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Bobby! I've news for you. Your brother-in-law, Norman Leighton, arrived in Kultänn this afternoon."

Kinloch dropped his pen, and swung round in amazement.

"Leighton? *Here?* What the dickens has he come for?"

Richard threw off his coat and laughed.

"You don't seem very pleased," he said.

Kinloch flushed under his tan.

"We're busy," he said, "and it's no time to have visitors knocking about. Besides, no sensible man would come up here in this heat, so I conclude he must be an ass. By Gad! what a furnace of a night it is!"

He drew a long breath, and ran his fingers through the red-gold hair that curled in damp rings upon his forehead, and Richard, catching its gleam in the lamplight, felt a sudden thrill run through his nerves at its likeness to that other hair he loved.

Kinloch yawned and spoke again.

"It's very certain he can't have bothered himself to come all this way just to see me. I'm certain he doesn't love me as much as that! Fancy leaving Vi unless one was obliged to! Can't think why anyone should be fool enough to come into this country at this time of year, can you?"

He looked up, waiting for an answer to his question, but Richard was saved the necessity, for a curious rumbling noise broke the silence, and Kinloch leapt to his feet.

"What the blazes was that? Can't be guns! There it is again!"

The rumbling grew louder, and he went to the door and opened it, turning back with a puzzled frown.

"Sounds for all the world like a traction-engine going over a bridge," he said; and Richard followed him to the door.

"Where's Ramshar Khan?" he began; but the words were hardly out of his mouth before the floor seemed to lift itself beneath his feet, and he was flung against Kinloch, who in turn staggered back against the wall, while the silence of the night was broken by a burst of wailing and shrieking from the servants' quarters.

Kinloch was white, but he laughed a trifle unsteadily.

"Only a bally earthquake!" he said. "Oh, Gad, I do feel sick!"

Richard flung open the outer door just as Ramshar Khan hurried up with a couple of torches, and, taking one, he went out into the compound, shouting orders above the tumult, quieting the frightened servants by his voice and presence, directing torches to be lit, and generally reducing chaos to order.

The town beyond the walls was already alive and humming, lights were showing, men were shouting, and amid the voices

and cries came the crash of a falling building and the tramp of soldiers turned out to keep order.

The earth heaved with a second shock just as Kinloch came out into the compound, and Richard shouted to him to get Roy saddled, and a few minutes later rode out into the town to reassure his terrified people, quite careless of any personal danger.

There was plenty of light to show the damage, which was not very heavy, and Richard's presence acted like a charm, soothing and steadying the people wherever he went ; and for the next two hours he was busy directing and working, till the tumult had died down, and something of order was restored. He had been superintending the rescue of a man from the fallen house, and after having seen him got out, badly frightened, but otherwise none the worse, turned to go back to the main street, where he had seen the Ressaldar directing some men of his troops. The crowd here was thick, and as he shouldered his way through it the grateful, frightened folk shouted his name and clung round him, and on the outskirts of the crowd a fat Mohammedan skulked in the shadow and fingered something held beneath his mantle.

The Sahib would pass up this way—yes, quite close. He was coming—ah !

A knife flashed in the darkness, and a man disappeared in the rabbit-warren of the bazaar.

The Ressaldar, meanwhile, having seen Cavanagh go down the hill, was a trifle anxious at his long absence, and strode down the hill after him in time to see a man's form dash into one of the alleys, and Richard stagger with the force of the blow and fall.

The next moment he was on his knees beside him, and a crowd was gathering, staring in horror at the crimson stain spreading so rapidly over the Sahib's white coat.

But before help could be brought, Richard lifted himself on one hand and met the old Sikh's agonized glance.

"It's all right !" he muttered. "Give me your arm. . . . Only a trifle !"

Helped by a dozen willing hands, he got to his feet, just as Mellishe, attracted by the clamour, came up.

"What's this ? What's the matter ? Good God, Cavanagh ! are you hurt ?"

Ramadur Singh was binding a length torn from his tunic over the wound, and Richard was able to weakly reassure him.

"No ; nothing much. Somebody wanted to rob me, I suppose."

He insisted on treating the matter lightly, and, indeed, the wound proved to be but a slight one, the blade of the knife having been caught and turned by the buckle of his belt, or it would have undoubtedly been fatal, but in reality he knew that the matter was serious. It meant murder, and he was pretty certain in his own mind that the would-be murderer was Abdul Gharfur.

In the first place, he had made an enemy of the fat Moham-medan three years ago by giving judgment against him in a certain case, and, in consequence, had been fired at in his own compound. Since then Abdul Gharfur had mysteriously disappeared—until to-night.

He had not had more than a second's glimpse of his enemy, but that fat unctuous face was not to be forgotten. Having failed in his first attempt, the old scoundrel was evidently in the pay of someone powerful enough to protect him should any trouble arise. Who that someone was Richard had no longer any shadow of doubt. As it was, the wound in no way prevented him from rising after three hours' feverish sleep and starting on a long day's ride to see what damage the earthquake had wrought among the nearer villages.

All that day he worked in the blazing sunshine, riding from village to village, noting damage, arranging immediate relief works, distributing supplies where they were most needed, and restoring confidence and hope in the breasts of the frightened people. He reached Kultänn about six o'clock, utterly dog-tired, yet knowing rest was for the present out of the question ; visited Scott, had his wound dressed, and wrote an official despatch to the Commissioner of the damage done by the earthquake, and flung himself at once into organizing prompt relief for the more urgent cases in Kultänn itself.

During his absence earlier in the day Norman Leighton had formally made his brother-in-law's acquaintance, and Kinloch rode up from the club with scowling brows and angry eyes.

During the brief half-hour's rest immediately after dinner he voiced his opinion of his sister's husband.

"A brute and a bully !" he said shortly, smoking fast, and kicking the floor with his heel. "Wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. What possessed Violet to marry a man like that ? The man's rotten through and through ! Hope to goodness he takes himself off soon."

By which Richard learnt that the interview had not been an entire success.

The next few days passed without any untoward event. The would-be assassin had not been caught, and Richard Cavanagh and Leighton had only met out of doors, where no conversation could be exchanged between them; but Richard knew that some sort of a climax was near. It came one stifling Saturday evening.

All day long the heat had been excessive, and after dinner Richard and Kinloch strolled down to the club for a game of billiards. Mellishe, Scott, Curtis, and half a dozen other men were lounging about, smoking and talking. Richard nodded to Scott and Mellishe, and flung himself into a chair.

"Phew! what a night it is!" he exclaimed. "Khitmutgar, bring me a whisky-and-soda! Any news, Scotty?"

"Not a particle, except a note from old Gotra Das saying his native apothecary's kicked the bucket, and asking for another one!"

"Bucket, or apothecary, or both?" Mellishe asked, and a laugh went round the room. Kinloch looked at his chief.

"Doesn't he hope he may get it!" he cried. "Who's going to create 'em in this place?"

"What did the last die of, Scott?" one of the other men inquired, and Scott took a long drink.

"Cholera, my son! They always do! Got no stamina, these Hindus. Go down like flies if they get a pain in their tummy! Fright does it, as a rule, but this beggar got the genuine article."

Mellishe lit a pipe, and threw the match under the table.

"Poor devil!" he said.

"Hi, khitmutgar! isn't there any ice?" Curtis, an artilleryman, groaned.

"Ice? Luxurious dogs, you fellows are! You'll be wanting an orchestra while you have dinner next."

"Dinner?" Mellishe turned in his long chair, and snorted in disgust. "Why do you libel it like that? We don't dine here—we eat!"

"That's it!" put in another man. "Mutton-chops and——"

"Dead goat, you mean! Pass the soda-water; I've an infernal thirst!"

Mellishe passed it, and loosened the tobacco in his pipe with

a hairpin, at the sight of which Curtis, Scott, and Williamson, another officer, hurled questions at his head.

"Hullo, Mellishe! Thought you hated women? Where did you get that hairpin?"

"The invincible Mellishe has been conquered at last! What's she like, old chap? White, black, or brown?"

"Black-and-tan, perhaps!"

"Did she kiss you good-bye and weep on your manly bosom, or did she say she'd be a sister to you? Always thought you were a bit of a sly dog, but never as bad as that! Shouldn't wonder if you've got her photograph and a lock of hair. Hand 'em over, there's a good boy, and let's look at 'em."

Mellishe repacked his pipe and laughed lazily.

"Oh, shut up, you bally ass!" he said, and Richard laughed.

"Tried and condemned!" he said. "Give him back his treasure, Bobby."

"How is the new dispensary getting on?" Curtis inquired, turning to Scott. Having been down at Lahore on special leave, he had not heard all the latest news. His question was unfortunate, and Scott growled.

"Not getting on at all. Usual thing—no money. Government seems to think you can get things free up here. Rotten hole it is! I can't even get a tube of vaccine that isn't stale by the time it reaches me, and as for drugs! How the deuce do they expect one to do anything?"

"Hark to the harassed G.P. on the rampage!" Mellishe said lazily. "If you want to talk Harley Street, why don't you go there?"

"Wish to Heaven I could!" Scott groaned. "Here, Cavanagh, have you got that letter from Hartley? What d'you think of it?"

"It's only what I expected," Richard said briefly. "There's been enough fuss in the House lately to upset any Government. I only wonder the order to reduce expenditure didn't come sooner."

The words had scarcely left his lips when Colonel Henderson entered in company with Norman Leighton, who nodded casually to the men he knew, and after glancing round the room turned to his host.

"Rather a change, this, to the National Liberal," he said with a laugh; and Curtis, who was close by, turned to him.

"Oh, come, Mr. Leighton, this isn't exactly Westminster,

you know," he said. "We're rather proud of this." And he waved his hand. "We spared no expense and used the finest mud obtainable. Don't be too hard on our efforts."

The khitmutgar entered at that moment with soda-water bottles and clean glasses, and Leighton mixed himself a drink and then sat down heavily. For a moment there was silence, broken by the entrance of the Ressaldar. When greetings were over, Leighton turned lazily to Mellishe.

"Who is he?" he asked. "I didn't know you admitted black men to your club."

Mellishe flashed a glance across the room, but the Ressaldar had not apparently heard the words.

Scott muttered, "Damned outsider!" and turned on his heel, and Henderson spoke gruffly.

"A word in your ear, Mr. Leighton. Don't use the expression 'black man' when speaking of a Sikh. It's not done. You were not to know differently, of course."

"Will you take a hand at bridge?" Mellishe put in, anxious to avert trouble, and Leighton nodded.

"Delighted!"

"Will you come over, then?"

Leighton rose and crossed to the card-table, and then paused, seeing that his companions were Curtis and Cavanagh.

"Shall we cut for partners?" Curtis was beginning, when Leighton drew back.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll change my mind," he said rather loudly, so that his voice was heard above the other voices in the room.

Curtis and Scott looked at one another, and Richard waited with impassive countenance.

After a scarcely perceptible pause Scott spoke rather awkwardly.

"Of course, if you'd prefer not to play. . . . It's just as you like, of course. Another time, perhaps."

Leighton's pale blue eyes were fixed on Richard's face with a meaning impossible to disregard.

"Thank you," he said. "Another time, as you suggest, I shall be delighted to play—in Mr. Cavanagh's absence."

A stir went through the room, and for a moment no one spoke. The insult was gross, and they looked to see Cavanagh avenge it then and there; but to everyone's surprise Richard did not speak, only grew a little paler than usual and shrugged his shoulders. Had Sir George Duncombe or Gifford

Chetwynde been present, they would have read that sign aright, and gone warily, but Leighton could not read it, and Colonel Henderson spoke quickly.

"Come, come, Mr. Leighton!" he said. "Mr. Cavanagh plays a strong game and a sound one, but we up here have never heard, and cannot possibly credit, that he does not play a straight one!"

Richard glanced at him. "Thanks, Colonel," he said, and as he spoke Leighton crossed from behind the table and halted before him.

"Your memory is short, Mr. Cavanagh!"

Richard lifted his head a little.

"You think so?" he asked.

"Yes. Have you forgotten the 3rd of October?"

"No. Have you?"

Leighton's face flushed purple. He put his finger to his collar, as if choking.

"No—damn you!" he said thickly.

An absolute hush fell on the room. It was obvious to everyone that he was trying to force a quarrel, though for what reason only Mellishe guessed, and for a minute the two men confronted one another in silence—Leighton flushed with rage and breathing heavily, Cavanagh pale under his tan, with a dangerous look beneath the coldness of his eyes.

Colonel Henderson, used to reading men, saw that, despite his apparent nonchalance, he was in reality holding himself with all his strength. At last he spoke.

"If you were not a guest here, Mr. Leighton, you should take that back," he said very quietly. "As it is, I will wish you good-night."

He bowed formally and turned on his heel, but before he could reach the door Leighton spoke.

"Do you think I'm going to let you skulk off like that?" he demanded. "You weren't in such a devil of a hurry to be gone when you were with my wife."

A murmur ran through the room. There was a stir among the watching men, and Richard wheeled round, all the studied calm gone from his face, his eyes blazing. The next moment Leighton was on his back on the floor.

Half a dozen men sprang forward, and the Colonel judged it time to interfere. He touched Richard's arm.

"He's half drunk, Cavanagh. You can't hammer a man in that condition."

Richard turned on him, breathing hard through distended nostrils; but before he could answer, Norman Leighton got slowly to his feet. His fall had sobered him, and he spoke distinctly.

"That's the second time," he said, wrenching at his collar and panting between his words. "God curse you! that's the second time! Your score's mounting up rather heavily! I suppose you thought you could play the fool with my wife, and then put a few thousand miles between you, and leave your account with me unsettled! You are finding your mistake, aren't you?"

He gasped for breath, and the Colonel took him by the arm, while Scott and Mellishe hastily interposed themselves between him and Richard.

"Come, come, Mr. Leighton, if you've anything to settle with Mr. Cavanagh, do it elsewhere, if you please," the Colonel said gruffly, and Leighton gave a short laugh.

"Settle anything? Settle? A bullet through his brain would settle him better than any way I know of."

Scott gripped Richard by the arm.

"Oh, come out of it!" he said savagely. "The man's drunk."

Between them he and Mellishe dragged Richard from the room, and Kinloch, who all the while had been a silent and horrified spectator, followed, and in the comparative silence of the mud-walled billiard-room they loosened their grip of him and fell back, appalled by the white fury of wrath in his face.

Scott spoke diffidently, not knowing what to say or do.

"Hang it all, he's drunk!" he said. "It's not worth taking notice of. Don't let——"

He broke off, for Richard turned on him with uplifted arm.

"Be quiet, damn you!" he cried, and then with a mighty effort regained some hold on himself.

"I beg your pardon!" he said hoarsely. "I forgot myself."

Scott uttered a sigh of relief.

"That's all right!" he answered cheerfully. "It's this confounded heat! Come and have a drink?"

Richard spoke with an effort, but his voice was steady, and he had regained control over himself.

"I think not, thanks," he said. "I've got some work to

do. . . . If you don't mind, I'll go straight back. Good-night—good-night, Mellishe."

"Good-night, Cavanagh."

"Good-night."

Mellishe looked at him curiously, but held out his hand as Richard passed, and he stopped to shake it, then went out into the darkness, followed by Kinloch.

The night was stiflingly hot, and a dry wind came across the arid plain like a blast from a furnace. Kinloch mopped his forehead and swore softly, but followed his chief, despite the pace, till they had reached the bungalow. In the hall Richard turned round.

"We'll tackle the land assessments from Jallundar to-night," he said. "If you will get them ready, I will be with you in a minute."

Kinloch murmured something and went into the office, utterly bewildered, and Richard went into the verandah, lit a cigarette, and began walking up and down in the thick hot darkness, conscious of nothing but that he must get himself in hand before he re-entered the house.

Just for the present he could not think of what Leighton had said, or the effect his words had produced on the other men in the club, for every nerve was strained to conquer the blind murderous rage that was shaking him.

He strode up and down, his jaw clenched, the veins on his temples and neck swollen with the force he was putting upon himself, drops of perspiration not born of the heat of the night standing on his forehead.

His lifelong habit of self-control stood him in good stead now; without it, he would by this time have had the stain of murder on his soul. As it was, in rather under half an hour he re-entered the house, perfectly calm and composed, only the tired lines round his eyes and the close set of his lips betraying the struggle through which he had passed.

Kinloch glanced up nervously as he entered the room, and was reassured by an odd smile.

"You're quite safe, Bobby; I'm not going to pull the house down over your head or throw the furniture about," he said. "Put the business out of your mind if you can. Leighton was drunk, and drink and this climate play the devil with a man not used to India. Now then, let's get to work!"

He sat down and commenced to look through the pile of papers ready for his inspection, and for the next hour or two

there was no sound save the scratching of Kinloch's pen, the turning of leaves, and an occasional curt correction or remark from Richard anent the business on hand.

The following day Richard spent at Perānan, inquiring about the illness that had carried off Gotra Das's apothecary and hearing cases in the little mud-walled room that did duty as a court of justice.

The sun was just setting as he started on his ride home, and about a mile out of Kultānn he met Scott returning from visiting a sick native woman. He pulled up, and Scott reined in alongside, and after a few minutes Richard voiced the subject that was in both their minds.

"Really, I behaved unpardonably to you and Mellishe last night," he said. "Why didn't you knock me on the head and shut me up?" He turned in his saddle and flashed one of his rare sudden smiles at his companion, who laughed.

"I should have been immensely sorry for myself if I had done!" he retorted. "You certainly weren't in the most amiable frame of mind! What an unutterable bounder Leighton it! He is *the* Gadarene swine!"

Richard's smile faded.

"He's rather objectionable, certainly," he said. "However, the only thing I can hope for is that, now he's had his say, he'll clear out and leave me to get on with my work."

Scott stared.

"Man alive! You're not going to let him off scot free, are you?" he exclaimed. "Why, he'll go spreading that devilry over the entire Province, and you know what a fool Hawkins is!"

Richard made no immediate answer, for that side of the question was new to him, and the words he had just heard opened his eyes to the possibility of Leighton going to headquarters with a definite and deliberate charge against him. He had been prepared for trouble, but this last possibility was more serious. He frowned and stared over the hot arid plain.

"Yes," he said at last, very slowly; "that is so."

Scott looked at him a trifle curiously.

"He's bent on mischief," he said, with significance in his tone, and if I were you I should keep a sharp look-out. I neither know nor care what caused this mutual hatred, but I do know that he's a nasty customer, and he'll stick at nothing

to avenge the knock down you gave him last night. Take my advice, and don't give him the chance ! ”

He paused, then reined in his pony.

“ Well, here we are ! I'm off to hospital. 'Bye for the present ! ”

He lifted his hand and turned off to the ford, and Richard rode on to his bungalow. In the compound he saw the Colonel's charger waiting in the shade of the scanty trees, and he dismounted hastily and went indoors.

He found Colonel Henderson in the study, reading a two-months-old *Graphic* that Evelyn Chetwynde had sent. He put it down and held out his hand as Richard entered, and, when greetings had been exchanged, plunged into the object of his visit.

“ Look here, Cavanagh ! ” he began in his abrupt, jerky fashion, “ I don't want to interfere in business that's no concern of mine, but unluckily I've no choice. Leighton is my guest, and you're my friend. It's a deuced awkward position ! ”

Perplexed and angry as he was, Richard could hardly forbear a smile, and the Colonel went on.

“ You see, he seems to have some grudge against you, and says he came out here for the express purpose of meeting you.”

He paused a moment, and shot a glance at Richard's face, then spoke more gravely.

“ I had hoped it was merely the result of the heat and too much whisky, but I am sorry to say it is not so. To tell you the truth, Cavanagh,”—he lowered his voice and fixed his keen eyes on the other's face—“ he brings a very serious charge against you—a charge which it is most important you should at once refute.”

Richard's steady glance did not waver.

“ And that is—— ? ”

“ That you seduced his wife . . . that you tried to make her run away with you, and that you expect her to come out to India and join you. He swears he will ruin you unless you can definitely prove the contrary. . . . I'm exceedingly sorry to interfere, as I said before, and I don't believe a word of his story ; but at the same time my advice is, don't ignore the matter, but give him the proof he asks. It's easy enough, and if you don't, he will make trouble, and he's not worth it. My advice is, prove what he asks, and thrash him afterwards ! ”

He got up without waiting for an answer as he finished his speech, and picked up his riding-switch.

"Well, I must be off. I only looked in to tell you this, and I'm glad it's over. The man's a scoundrel. Dress him thoroughly!"

Richard rose, too. His companion did not seem to expect any answer to his advice, and he walked on to the verandah with him, exchanged a few commonplaces, and watched him ride out of the compound. Then he went back to his study, locked the door, and sat down at his writing-table.

"By Jove!" he said beneath his breath, and his voice was very bitter; "he's a cleverer man than I thought! What the dickens had I better do?"

CHAPTER XI

FOR three days Norman Leighton stayed within the Colonel's bungalow, nursing his hatred, and Richard went about his work with set lips and head held high, in a manner that warned the inquisitive not to interfere with him. There was, of course, much curiosity at work, for one man cannot openly attack another man and accuse him, as Leighton had accused Richard Cavanagh, without the matter arousing a good deal of comment, but it said something for Richard's character that no one dared ask him any questions.

The heat had come very early, and day after day the heavens were a brazen dome above the panting earth, and once again Richard tried to bring before the Government the necessity for completing the reservoir above Kultänn. He was answered at first with vague promises, then with distinct annoyance, and a polite hint that further appeals would not be welcomed. So he tore the letter up, and went about his work in grim silence, till one morning, about a week after the incident in the club, when riding home after a hard day's work, he met Captain Mellishe and Scott. They reined up alongside, and rode into Kultänn with him, and at the entrance to the compound dismounted and entered the verandah for a drink.

In the course of the next ten minutes, when all three

were lying in canvas chairs and drinking thirstily at intervals, Mellishe spoke of what was in his soul.

"Cavanagh, what are you going to do with regard to the Ramdar Well? It's closed, I know, but the water-supply's horribly inadequate, and you say your reservoir is shut down?"

Kinloch, coming out from indoors in time to hear the last sentence, uttered an explosive snort of disgust, and Richard, turning lazily, waved him to a chair.

"Sit down, Bobby, and if you're good you may have a drink! Here's Mellishe asking riddles with no answers to 'em."

Kinloch grinned.

"Beastly bad taste on his part, then, in this heat! By Joye! what a rotten hole this is!"

"Don't you grumble, my son!" remarked Scott. "You haven't been working since daybreak to keep the fever down in a village swarming like an ant-heap with vermin and disease! Some people are never satisfied!"

"The parade-ground is hot enough to blister you," Mellishe growled. "I've been bucketing a new draft through squad-drill for two mortal hours, and I'm dead to the world. One of our troopers died from heat-apoplexy last night. There's famine lower down the river, and the men are fed up and like a lot of sick cats!"

Richard blew a cloud of cigarette smoke to the ceiling.

"For sheer unadulterated cheerfulness commend me to Mellishe!" he remarked to nobody in particular. "His conversation is funny without being vulgar. Leave my shins alone!"

"Don't take liberties with my character, then," Mellishe retorted, subsiding. "You'd be cheerful if you wallowed in prickly heat all down your back! Oh, curse the weather! let's talk of something else!"

"Delighted, I'm sure! Have another drink?"

"No, thanks! It's lukewarm. Got any papers?"

"A two-months-old *Graphic* and two *Gazettes*. They're over there. Talking of papers, I see in our rag that Mackenzie of Thāl wants to sell that black Balkh stallion of his. You've seen him, Scott. What's he worth?"

"Good beast, but too heavy in the shoulder. They all are, that breed. Pity. Otherwise they're the finest horses going. Didn't know you wanted another mount."

"I could do with one. Think I'll give him a look."

"By the way, where is the Ressaldar?" Scott inquired.

"I haven't seen him for a week!"

"He's gone South to Thāl for his spring festival. I wanted to let him go to Amritsar, but he wouldn't hear of it. Said we'd too many raw troops on hand."

"I didn't know they held the Holi," Kinloch said. "Surely that's only for the Hindus."

"It's a great thing—sort of Saturnalia for the whole of the North. But you're quite right. He hasn't gone for that, but for his own special Sikh festival—the Hola Mohalla. It's held the day after. Pity the dear old chap couldn't have been at the Golden Temple. The Colonel says he shall take care he goes next year!"

"Why didn't the Colonel insist?" Richard asked.

"Who the—— Ah, good-afternoon!"

Ramshar Khan was having a few days' holiday, and in his place he had sent his nephew, who, directly he had the simplest duty to perform, promptly lost his head, and now, without question or warning, came out on to the verandah, announced, "Leighton Sahib, Excellency!" and fled before wrath could fall upon him.

Norman Leighton glanced round, nodded to Kinloch and the others, and came heavily across to where Richard stood. He was deeply flushed, there was a purplish tinge about his lips, and his eyes were bloodshot. The heat had worked ill with him, and he looked in a dangerous state. Scott pursed his lips into a silent whistle, and watched him keenly under bent brows. Mellishe drew back a little, and Kinloch watched Richard.

Leighton spoke first, in answer to Richard's formal greeting.

"I've run you to earth, I see," he said. "Well, it'll save a lot of trouble. I must say I was rather surprised to see you running away the other night. It isn't like you. You told me you remembered our last meeting in London, I'm glad. It'll make things clearer. I gave you an opportunity to save your skin the other night. Why didn't you take it?"

Richard was standing where he had risen. His face was grim and impassive, but there was a curious glitter in his eyes that might have warned the other. He spoke very quietly.

"That was kind of you. Unfortunately, you happened to be drunk."

Leighton came a little nearer.

"I'm not drunk now," he said, malice in every line of his heavy face; "and I came to see you for two reasons. First, to tell you you are a scoundrel and a blackguard; secondly, for this!"

He took a step forward, and the other three men sprang simultaneously to their feet; but they were too late, for, with a movement as quick as a tiger's spring, Leighton had raised his riding-switch and struck Richard full across the face.

The force of the blow, coming as it did unexpectedly, was so great that Richard staggered, and, before either of the other men could interfere, Kinloch suddenly hurled himself at Leighton's throat.

"You swine!" he cried shrilly—"you damned lying swine!"

The scuffle—for it was little more—was short-lived, for Scott pulled Kinloch off, and Mellishe interposed his not inconsiderable weight between them.

For a moment Richard stood absolutely still, the cynosure of all eyes—from Mellishe's to the little crowd of horrified native servants in the compound and verandah; every muscle rigid, only the blood trickling from the crimson line across his cheek and mouth. Then, white to the very lips, with a look on his face that none of the others had ever seen before, he took one step forward and looked into Leighton's face.

"Go!" he said. "Go! or, by God, I will kill you where you stand!"

For a second the two men stood facing one another; then Leighton went stumbling out of the verandah and shouting unsteadily for his horse in the compound; and, in the deathly silence of the place he had left, Richard drew out his handkerchief and wiped away the trickling blood from his cheek and mouth.

Mellishe spoke first, carefully looking at his boots.

"It's getting late, Cavanagh; I must be off. Don't forget you're dining with me at the club to-morrow night."

With that he got himself out of the verandah, and Scott followed him, only pausing to lay his hand in passing on Cavanagh's shoulder.

"Go and bathe your face, Dickie," he said, with unwonted gentleness in his voice. "I'll send you up a lotion at once." And he went out, leaving Kinloch alone with his chief.

The boy dared not speak. His one wish was a longing for the ground to swallow him, and he stood with his back to Cavanagh, breathing hard and chokingly, trembling with rage, miserable as he never before had been in his life. His sister! his sister! And Richard Cavanagh! Oh, it was infamous, impossible! He would not believe it! *His sister!* The walls were swimming, and the blood beat tumultuously in his temples. Suddenly in his agony he felt a hand on his shoulder, and, starting round, he met Richard eyes, and there was in them that which quieted his half-formed terrors once and for all.

Richard spoke a little hoarsely, but his voice was quite quiet.

"There's no need to be afraid, Bobby," he said, and there was a significance in his voice which Kinloch understood. "Go down to the club—go out. I can manage this affair by myself."

Kinloch obeyed. He was glad to go, for Richard's manner frightened him. He dreaded he knew not what, and when he was clear of the house he went to the club, and stayed there, miserably uneasy.

As for Richard, his rage seemed to have left him. He felt curiously calm, and bathed the cut across his face with perfectly steady fingers and even a certain amount of interest. It was not deep; the scar would probably not be permanent. Lucky it did not catch the eye! He stood for a moment, when he had dressed it, looking idly round the room; then he locked up his papers as though for the night, lit a cigarette and walked out of the house.

The sun had just set, and, with its setting, a faint coolness was creeping into the air. Richard summoned the k itmutgar, ordered Roy to be saddled, and walked the length of the verandah. In the deepening twilight he did not see a crouching figure wrapped in a dark mantle peer forth at him with devoted eyes that blazed as they saw his face; neither did he see it slip away as he mounted, and if he had seen he would not have cared, for just then he was numbed, like a man who has been wounded by a bullet. His nerves were paralysed for the moment, and his whole mental activity was in abeyance.

He rode away from the town quite slowly, holding Roy in, for he was fresh after two days in the stable, and longing for a chance to bolt; and the darkness fell over the desolate

country and the stars rushed out in the hot sky, and still Richard rode, careless of danger, although it lurked on every hand, for the country by Kultänn is such that the Night Patrol fires as it challenges.

Suddenly Roy stumbled and nearly came down, and the jerk seemed to rouse Richard from the dreamlike composure that had wrapped him round, for he pulled the horse up almost on his haunches, swung him round, and for the first time in his life dug vicious spurs into his sides. He reared at the touch, snorted, and, dropping his head, laid himself out in a mad gallop, while Richard, the blood surging through his veins and hammering in his temples, bent low over his neck and urged him on.

He never knew quite what happened or where they went that night, for the blind lust of slaughter was in his blood and the darkness was red before his eyes.

Only, when the dawn was breaking, he found himself riding up the road from Perānan, the horse trembling in every limb, with heaving sides and foam-flecked chest. There were lights in the compound, and, as he rode in, a great shout from the servants, and a cry that pierced above all the tumult, as Ramshar Khan broke through the throng and caught his stirrup.

"Sahib, Sahib! you have returned! God is good, and hath given my life back to me again! We have searched for you for hours, Sahib! Yes, I will myself see to the horse! He is uninjured, Sahib! And I will follow thee then, when he is fed and brushed!"

He led the trembling animal away, soothing him with caressing fingers and soft-murmured words, and Richard reeled up the steps into the house, dripping with perspiration and utterly exhausted.

When Ramshar Khan came in, ten minutes later, he found Richard lying in his long cane chair, his eyes shut, his face white as the papers on his table, save for a livid line that ran across its pallor, and looking like a man near the point of death.

The old Pathan wasted no time in lamentation. He knew what utter exhaustion of mind and body meant, and with capable fingers he tended his beloved master, doctoring him with strange native remedies, till Richard fell asleep, and slept far on into the following morning, awakening about midday, clear in mind and refreshed in body.

He rose and bathed and dressed, going over the events of the past night, for the long hours of dreamless sleep had restored his self-control, and he had himself once more in hand.

He was not quite certain of his next step with regard to Norman Leighton. For the present he felt it was wiser not to see him, for it was impossible to carry out the Colonel's advice, and Leighton would not be able to leave Kultänn without his having knowledge of the fact. So he decided to leave the matter for the one day, lest, in avenging the insult, he should stain his hands with murder, and all day he worked, barely pausing for meals, trying to keep his thoughts off the matter that chiefly occupied them and the stinging smart of that livid seam across his face.

When the dusk had fallen, he left the office and went down to the club, and as soon as he entered it perceived something had happened.

Mellishe, Curtis, and one or two others were loitering about the billiard-room, talking in a desultory fashion, and as Richard entered, Mellishe broke off and came across to him, rather pointedly.

"Ah, here you are! Glad to see you. Hoped you'd come down. Hot, isn't it?"

Richard glanced at him curiously. There was something rather effusive about his welcome.

"Pretty bad," he said, as they shook hands. "What are you all looking so mysterious about? Anything happened? Where's the Colonel? Where's Scott?"

Mellishe glanced at Curtis, but Curtis was lighting his pipe with extreme care, and Richard's brows contracted.

"Oh, what is it?" he said irritably. "Have I stepped into the middle of a conspiracy, or what?"

Still silence, and at it his momentary annoyance vanished. His face set, and he looked at Mellishe with disconcerting steadiness.

"What has happened?" he asked in a changed voice. "Ah, here's Colonel Henderson! Will you tell me what has happened, Colonel?"

Henderson took in the situation at a glance, and spoke to the point, as his fashion was.

"Yes," he said gruffly. "It's time you heard. Norman Leighton was found dead by the Black Rocks this afternoon—knifed through the lungs."

There was a long silence ; then Curtis moved and knocked down a billiard-cue. It fell with a crash, and somebody swore under his breath. The noise seemed to break a curious spell, and Richard spoke.

"When did it happen?" he asked.

The Colonel watched him narrowly from under heavy brows.

"Scott says he had been dead sixteen or eighteen hours. That would put it about midnight."

"Have they caught the murderer yet?"

"No; not yet."

Richard moved a step forward; his momentary dismay was over. He was the authoritative capable ruler of his district once more.

"If you will give me all the particulars obtainable I will get to work," he said. "It is a great pity so long a time has elapsed. Why was I not told at once?"

A curious stir went through the room; then the Colonel moved forward as though to arrest his progress, hesitated, and drew back. Mellishe looked at the other men, and they answered his mute signal and trooped out, leaving Colonel Henderson and Richard Cavanagh alone. The elder man spoke very gruffly.

"Wait one moment, Cavanagh. I've something else to tell you. Kinloch tells me you were out riding alone for some hours. It's a damnable question for me to ask you, but it's better you should settle matters at once before the inquiry. Can you prove an alibi?"

Richard drew back sharply, and for a moment stared at the other man with amazement and horror in his eyes.

"Do the others think, do *you* think, that it is my doing?" he said harshly, and Colonel Henderson's steel-blue eyes searched his face.

"No," he said, "I do not. Neither do they."

There was a moment's silence; then Richard stretched out his hand, and the Colonel gripped it. Richard spoke first.

"Thank you for telling me yourself. The position is about as bad as it can well be. I went out last night—riding—for I knew that unless I did something, anything, to keep moving—there'd be the devil to pay. Perhaps you can understand that I didn't want to meet Leighton again for an hour or two till I'd cooled off a bit. I had no one with me. No one knows where I went. I think it was out Parachinwar way—I'm not sure myself—but I did not see Leighton, and I did

not murder him. . . . I don't settle my quarrels with a knife in the back. The case against me is about as damning as it can possibly be, short of actual proof, isn't it ? ”

The elder man's eyes gleamed a little under their shaggy brows. He sat down and signed to another chair.

“ Sit down, Cavanagh,” he said. “ You're overworking, man ! And you needn't have told me all that. I've known you seven years.”

Something stung unexpectedly in Richard's eyes. For a moment he clenched his teeth and did not move ; then he sat down and passed his hand wearily over his forehead.

“ I hated him,” he said roughly, “ and, God knows, I had reason enough for it ! But I wouldn't have had him die like that—murdered—— ” He broke off, stared in front of him for a moment, then rose. “ Well, this will give me some more work to do. I shall hardly be arrested on suspicion.” And he laughed jarringly. “ I'll give orders that the search is to begin to-morrow at dawn.”

Ten minutes later he was on his way back to the bungalow, but for fully half an hour after he reached it he made no preparations at all, for in an overwhelming flood of thought came the realization of what Leighton's death really meant to him . . . to him . . . and to that other.

It was dawn before he slept, and then his rest was broken by horrible dreams, and he woke in a cold sweat, despite the heat, and lay panting in the stifling darkness, listening to the creak and jar of the punkah.

Orders from headquarters necessitated haste, and for the next fortnight Richard spent his days in the saddle and his nights in the office, snatching brief hours of broken tortured sleep, working Scott, and Kinloch, and the Hindu clerks till they had no strength left even to rebel, and himself more remorselessly than all the rest. The official inquiries were at once set on foot, but not a sign was discovered of the murderer. Leighton was buried in the bare little mud-walled graveyard, and Kinloch wrote to his sister, and watched his chief with anxious blue eyes. The pressure of work was so great that he had no time to go to the club or meet the other men ; and the time dragged by, long successions of weary days of toil, filled with blinding dust and blazing sunshine, with a brazen vault for sky and dead air that stifled the lungs to breathe.

Richard went on working steadily, despite Scott's curses, and the warnings and entreaties of the Ressaldar ; and, despite

the heat and the broken restless slumber, he was happy, for he was waiting for an answer to the letter he had written to Violet Leighton, and the thought of her was with him all through the stifling darkness of the nights, and upheld him, working, when figures and written words danced before his eyes in the pitiless heat of the day.

One night in mid-September, Scott came to the club, and dropped with a groan into the first empty chair.

"Hi, khitmutgar! Poora whisky peg, and be quick about it. Oh Lord, what a night!"

Curtis, too lazy to even read the weekly copy of the *India Gazette*, left that day at Kultänn, yawned and stretched himself.

"Hell with the lid off," he ejaculated. "Chuck me the matches, Willis!"

Willis, a grey-headed hard-riding man of middle age and jovial temper, tossed the matches across and looked at Scott.

"Any news yet?" he asked.

"Not a particle. The man's disappeared off the face of the earth. He had too long a start, and these people will never give evidence against each other. Besides, he may have crossed the Border."

"I suppose there's no doubt of his existence?"

Scott looked sharply in the direction of the voice, which came from a lanky red-haired subaltern sitting on the farther side of the room.

"No more than there is of yours," he said, very distinctly.

There was a moment's pause. The hot weather demoralizes men, and no one seemed much surprised at Clifford's question. After a moment he spoke again.

"You sound pretty certain, but I don't see why."

"Perhaps not," Scott said shortly. "Infants of your age don't see everything. 'Twouldn't be good for 'em."

Clifford shot an ugly glance across the room.

"After all, Leighton and he were enemies, and Leighton had struck him. Personally, I should think it's quite probable. There seems to have been some row about Leighton's wife. Cavanagh was her lover, I suppose. That was enough to make Leighton nasty, and Cavanagh knew he'd ruin him. I don't blame Cavanagh for getting him out of the way."

A big hand came over the back of his chair, and, seizing him by the neck, gently tipped him on to the floor, and Curtis's deep, lazy voice followed the action.

"My son, you are still green and youthful, so this time we

won't kick you for those remarks, but by the same token it's time you learned that those are the sort of things that are not said. Understand?"

Clifford picked himself up, scowling; but a glance round the room sufficed to show him his mistake, and, having at bottom a decent strain, he muttered something that might be construed into an apology, and went out of the billiard-room.

When he had gone, Mellishe reverted to the subject.

"I didn't want to say so in front of that youngster," he said. "But if there really had been any scandal, I'll swear it was of Mrs. Leighton's making. She's a thorough wrong 'un."

Curtis looked into the depths of his glass and spoke thoughtfully.

"Wasn't she the woman at the bottom of poor Skelton's business? Skelton of the Engineers? Yes, I thought so. And Branscomb—he sent in his papers and shot himself, poor devil. Yes, that's the woman. Oh, she's a rotter!"

Mellishe lit a cigarette, and watched the blue smoke curling upwards.

"She's the cleverest and most unscrupulous woman I've ever met," he said. "Always kept clear of a direct scandal in the neatest way; but she's been playing with fire lately, and she'll be precious glad Leighton is dead. Did you know Branscomb, Curtis?"

"Yes," Curtis replied. "Decent a boy as you could wish for—and pretty. Brown eyes, curly hair, clean-cut features—you know the type. She made him fetch and carry for her, ride with her, wait for her, pay her bills, and then broke him. He was treasurer of the funds for some regimental charity show, and he took 'em to pay her bills with. It was found out, and he shot himself. . . . I was with him when he died . . . two days later . . . bungled his job, poor chap; and, by Jove! I've an account to settle with Mrs. Leighton if ever I meet her."

"What made him do it?"

"Oh, she made him fall in love with her. She told him her husband neglected her, and he was full of some mad Galahad sort of scheme to rescue her from a life of degradation, and protect her from her husband's brutal ill-usage. Oh, you know the sort of thing those rotten women can fill an innocent boy up with; and he believed it all, poor little devil—he believed it all. He wouldn't listen to a word against her.

We all saw it coming, and tried to stop it. Tried to get him away. Got him a chance of his step in a regiment going foreign. He refused it. Went to her with the news, and, of course, she made a scene. Then he went from bad to worse. Violet Leighton made him pay her bills, and I believe she put him up to the only way he could do it. I'd believe anything of her. And the result Scott has told you, and a bullet through the lung."

He broke off and looked up, then jumped violently, and felt a curious thrill creep over his skin, for, unperceived by anyone, Richard Cavanagh had entered the room and stood by the door, his face curiously white but for that livid streak across it.

Everyone looked up, wondering at his sudden movement, and there was a moment's silence of utter consternation; then, with an heroic effort, Mellishe came to the rescue.

"Hullo!" he said jerkily; "come for a game? Play you a hundred up!"

But Richard Cavanagh took no more notice of the remark than if it had never been. He came a little forward and addressed Curtis.

"Major Curtis, you were speaking of a lady as I came in," he said, in a curiously level voice. "I think you were mistaken in what you said. She happens to be a friend of mine."

No one spoke or moved. He came a step nearer and spoke sharply.

"I am waiting for your apology."

Still no one spoke, and he glanced round the room at the circle of horrified faces, then back to Curtis, who looked helplessly at Mellishe.

"O Lord!" Curtis said very softly, and was silent.

Richard bit his lip.

"I demand the instant withdrawal of your words and a public apology—here and now."

Curtis got up.

"I told the truth," he said, in a very quiet voice.

Richard neither moved nor spoke, but he was conscious that every face was strangely pitiful. Then Curtis spoke again.

"I spoke the truth," he repeated. "I am sorry you heard it, but it can't be helped now. Mrs. Leighton—Violet Leighton—is all I said and more. Mellishe knows as well as I do. She ruined Skelton; she caused Branscomb's suicide

... if you refuse to believe me, ask the Colonel. He was Branscomb's Major. He will . . . tell you all you want to know."

There was a deathlike silence ; no one moved or spoke, and slowly the fury died out of Richard's face, leaving a curiously-dazed look in its place ; then Mellishe spoke, quietly, clearly, distinctly, and he listened with the ashen tint deepening about his lips. At the end he swayed a little, then drew himself up, and flung back his head with the gesture they knew so well. He took no notice of anyone but the big fair man, who watched him with dismay and pity in his blue eyes. Then at last he spoke.

"I beg your pardon," he said, quite quietly. "I seem to have made a mistake."

Curtis tried to speak and held out his hand, but, even as Richard grasped it, the lights were receding, and there was a singing in his ears.

The men drew back for him as he crossed the room, and someone opened the door ; then he was outside in the merciful darkness, away from those pitying glances that cut him like a whip.

He walked back to his bungalow, something of the same stunned feeling upon him as he had had that night eight weeks ago, when Leighton was murdered. The meaning of what had happened had not yet penetrated clearly to his brain. It was soon to do so.

He went straight to his study, and on the table found his letters. On the top of the pile was an envelope addressed in a hand he did not know, with the English postmark upon it. Mechanically he ripped it open, and a newspaper cutting from some halfpenny paper fluttered out. He picked it up and read it. The words conveyed no sense to him, and he read them again :

"A marriage of well-known Society beauty and Prince Boris Liadov. On the 9th instant, only a fortnight after hearing of her husband's death in India, Mrs. Norman Leighton and Prince Boris were married quite quietly at a registry office. The newly wedded couple have left for Vienna."

He dropped the paper on the table and stood quite still, staring at it. Then he spoke, just above his breath.

"My God !" he said, very softly. "Oh, my God !"

The cruel printed words burned themselves in letters of fire on his brain . . . there was no possibility of mistake . . .

he had believed in her love for him, and she was this— *this* ! He began to laugh jarringly, but after a moment the laugh broke, and shook, and changed into helpless sobbing, and he dropped into his chair and buried his face in the crook of his right arm; his left flung outstretched across the table, gripping its edge convulsively.

The paroxysm passed at last, but long after the agony of sobbing had died into silence, he did not move, for utter exhaustion held him in its grip, and he was incapable of even thought. That more merciful stage passed too, giving place to the torture of complete realization of what his loss meant. Under all his charm of manner he was an intensely reserved man, and as he thought of all this woman had meant to him, of how he had laid his heart bare to her, he writhed with shame. He had believed her to be suffering, helpless, bound by duty—duty ! And she had led him on, listened, told him she loved him, and laughed behind his back at his easy credulity. Yet, was it possible that the woman he had seen weep so passionately that day in Richmond Park, the woman who had panted and trembled under his fierce caresses, could really be the same of whom these hideous things were said ? A wild hope leapt up in his heart that it was not true, that it was all a frightful mistake ; and on its heels came the memory of Curtis's words :

“ I spoke the truth. If you refuse to believe me, ask the Colonel, who will tell you all you want to know.”

And with the words came the memory also of Mellishe's pitying eyes, and the sympathy on every other face.

There would be no need to ask Colonel Henderson. Conviction in all its horror had dawned on him even before they had been aware of his presence in the billiard-room. He knew that now, without need of that fatal slip of paper that lay on the ground beside him. A helpless rage seized him at the thought of his colossal folly, a bitter scorn of his childish, whole-hearted belief in any woman, and that in its turn gave way to a sick despair, an utter weariness, a dread of to-morrow, and all the to-morrows stretching ahead.

Months of consistent overwork and constant exposure to chills and fever, whether in the terrible heat of summer or the bitterness of winter, combined with a never-ceasing struggle to get good results out of highly unpromising material, had served to sap even his superb strength, and he was beginning at last to feel the strain. He realized it more when at last he

went to his room and lay sleepless through the stifling hours that stretched between him and the dawn.

Just before Ramshar Khan called him, he fell into an uneasy doze, from which he awoke with a violent start to renewed power of suffering, and the work that could not wait for any private sorrow or pain.

When he entered the office, Kinloch looked up with his usual greeting, then uttered an exclamation of dismay. Richard was looking through some papers, and turned impatiently at the sound.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Anything wrong?"

Kinloch was staring at him with a shocked amazement in his eyes.

"Are you ill?" he said, answering the question with another, and Richard frowned.

"Ill? No, of course not. Are those maps finished? Good. You'd better ride over to Jallundar to-day; you know what I want done. I shall be at Perānan to-night. Don't forget to forward those papers to Hawkins, relating to the holdings at Ranadath. Those my letters? Pass them, please."

The letters were all Indian, and one from Simla made him frown angrily; his control over his temper was going, and he knew it. The inquiries aent Leighton's murder were both tiresome and disagreeable, and he felt that suspicion rested upon him; he and Leighton were enemies; the origin of that livid mark across his face was known to half Kultänn, certainly to Sir John Hawkins, probably at Simla; and on the night of Leighton's murder, he was unable to account satisfactorily for himself. The case was certainly unpleasant—against it being his personal character and years of valuable work. Whether this latter would stand against the suspicion remained to be seen. It was hardly likely that any formal charge would be brought against him, but it was possible that he might be compelled to resign his appointment.

He crushed the letter into a ball, and set a light to it, then went out into the verandah to order his horse for the long day's work ahead of him.

CHAPTER XII

THE heat increased as the summer advanced, and the little colony of Englishmen at Kultänn grew white-faced and hollow-eyed, and Scott went about with an ever-present fear hidden in his heart, for the cholera drew nearer, and the hospital at Parachinwar was still unfinished.

The resettlement of the valley kept Richard and his staff working desperately through the days of blazing sunshine and far into the stifling nights; and tempers grew short and nerves on edge; for a sixteen to twenty hours' working day is too much for any man's strength, and Richard's was seldom less than the latter, and his staff's only a little less than his.

Late one evening Scott rode up to see him with ill news from Thāl, and was greeted by a growl from Richard and a suppressed curse from Kinloch. Both men, in the thinnest of thin pyjamas, were sitting at the big centre table, drinking scalding tea, with the perspiration pouring off them.

Scott lit a pipe, and sat where he could get something of the draught from the squeaking punkah. He talked little, but his eyes were busy, and once or twice he saw Richard pause in his writing and scowl, first at the paper, then at nothing whatever. The third time he passed his hand over his eyes, as though to clear them, and frowned anew, the muscles round his mouth setting grimly. Scott said nothing, but watched him narrowly, and when at last Richard declared the work over for the night, and rose, he saw him start and stare at something apparently just in front of him. Kinloch went off to bed, dropping with sleep, despite the heat; but Richard made no movement, and seemed disposed to talk. After a while Scott spoke.

"Working pretty heavily, aren't you?"

"What? Yes, of course. We're horribly understaffed. As it is, we shan't get through the resettlement till Christmas."

"It doesn't seem to me that one Englishman and two native clerks are quite enough extra to help you through. By the way, there's no chance of the dispensary, is there? Or the reservoir?"

"Not the slightest! Seen the article in the *India Gazette* on the administration of the North-West Provinces? Some

fool's been drivelling about native legislation. I'll get it for you."

He got up to cross the room, took two steps, and drew back sharply, then muttered something under his breath, picked up the paper from where it lay, and came back with set mouth and two upright lines between his brows.

"There you are," he said. "Read it."

But Scott put the paper aside.

"Yes, I will—presently," he said. "When did you first begin to see that in front of you?"

Richard started violently.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he said.

"Read the paper, and don't make confoundedly bad jokes."

Scott took no notice of the offensiveness of either tone or words; he knew the reason only too well.

"What's the good of cursing me?" he asked. "It isn't my fault. . . . Perhaps I can help you, though. Not sleeping well, are you?"

The anger died out of Richard's face; a hunted look came into his eyes, and they met Scott's with an unspoken entreaty.

"I haven't slept for three nights at all, and not more than half an hour for a week," he said. "Cheerful, isn't it? Scott, if you can give me anything to make me sleep, I'll be eternally grateful. I'm jumpy, and my temper's like a file! I want to curse everyone that speaks to me, and my eyes seem going wrong. Black specks and odd little streaks of light; and since Friday I've taken to seeing things—sounds as if I'd been drinking, doesn't it?—faces—and—other things! Oh, it's dreadful! For pity's sake give me some sleep, Scott, or I shall go mad!"

He broke off with a shudder, and Scott, who had not taken his eyes from Richard's face, spoke very quietly.

"All right, old man, all right. Tell me . . . this began . . . after that night at the club?"

Richard's face contracted; he spoke briefly.

"Yes. Two nights after it."

"And all this month you've been hanging on like this?"

"Yes."

"And haven't slept at all since Friday?"

"No."

"You ought to get away."

"That's utterly impossible."

"Even if it's a certainty that you'll crock up if you don't?"

Richard nodded.

"Yes. Besides, it doesn't matter."

"That's bally rot!" Scott said decisively. "You can't be spared just now. Don't get sorry for yourself."

Richard laughed shortly.

"My dear chap, the Indian Empire won't go to pieces if an obscure District Officer drops out. Men are cheap out here."

"Not men like you," Scott muttered to himself, and knocked out his pipe on his heel.

"I don't suppose it will," he said dryly. "But at the same time a new-comer would have the very devil of a time just now, with half the coinage Kabuli and half British rupees! To say nothing of all the other matters. As for not being wanted, I've got as much right to bewail my lot as you have. . . . I should be missed far less! It may not be a matter of national importance if either of us goes out, but it would be deuced inconvenient! Get to bed, and I'll see what I can do for you—and pack your pillows well."

Richard rose obediently, but as he went out of the room Scott's face lost its cheerful unconcern. He had seen men like this before, and he knew what the hot weather could do to the strongest constitution, when it was combined with desperate overwork and—as in this case—deep personal trouble.

After a few moments he went into Richard's bedroom, and found him lying down, with wide-open, dreary eyes.

"Giving you a shocking amount of trouble, I'm afraid," he said. "But I shall be all right after a good night's sleep. What's that? Morphia? Excellent! Here you are."

He held out his wrist, and Scott inserted the needle, talking lightly the while.

"There you are. You're going to sleep now, quite quietly, and in the morning you'll feel fit again. Funny how the morning always makes one feel better, isn't it? Night has a way of making one a bit of a coward sometimes, but it's all right for you. I'm going to bag that other bed, if I may . . . it's too late to go home . . . yes . . . that's better . . . there's no fear this time. . . . 'Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night . . . for the pestilence that walketh in darkness . . . but it shall not come nigh thee. . . .' Don't forget that. It's worth remembering . . . yes . . . it's all right now."

He broke off, and passed his finger before Richard's eyes;

there was no movement, and he bent down and listened. The breathing was even and slow ; the set muscles of the jaw and brow relaxed ; he was asleep.

"Thank God !" Scott whispered, and stood for a moment looking down at him very tenderly ; then he moved the night-light away, and, crossing the room, packed his pillows, lay down on the other camp-bed, and dropped asleep.

Richard awoke the next morning almost himself again, and deeply grateful to Scott. He said very little, but they understood one another, and the close handshake was eloquent enough.

They were having breakfast when Ramshar Khan entered the room.

"Sahib, a man has come hither for the Doctor Sahib. . . . I think it is the Colonel Sahib's groom. He bears this note." He handed a note to Scott, who tore it open, glanced hastily through it, and whistled very softly.

"Tell the man I will come at once," he said, and Ramshar Khan departed.

Richard looked across the table.

"Has it come ?" he asked ; and Scott nodded and rose.

"Yes. Four men gone down, three others sickening. The fight has begun. God help us now !"

"Amen to that," Kinloch said very softly. "What am I to do ?"

"Ride over to Perānan. I'll give you full instruction. Tell the Colonel I'll be with him in under half an hour. Hullo ! Here's the mail !"

The English mail was a bulky one, and among his letters lay two with the Pangley postmark, the uppermost being addressed in Nancy's weird scrawl. He glanced through it, smiled tenderly over the loving, eager little heart revealed in every line, and thrust it into his pocket with Evelyn's, for that he wished to read later when he had time to enjoy it.

At eleven that night he opened it, and read it through twice, pausing at the last sentences, with a curious thrill running through his nerves.

"I am not given to fanciful imaginings, but this last few days I have a strange knowledge that you are in trouble. I do not know what it can be, and equally I am certain it is there. I know if you can you will tell me what it is . . . and

now, as always, I pray to God to shelter and guard you and bless your work.'"

The letter comforted him, and he lay down with no fears for the next few hours, despite the phantoms of his wearied brain that had vexed him for so long. There were other things to think of to-night besides his own personal suffering . . . three men had died that day, forty had sickened. The fight with an awful death had begun in earnest.

He was up by daybreak the next morning, for appeals came from Perānan and Jallundar and half a dozen other villages, all telling the same grievous tale, and begging for aid. The resettlement of the entire valley had to be suspended; there was work and to spare for all able-bodied men without writing State papers, casting up accounts, and reckoning Government assessments.

Scott knew neither rest nor sleep, save in broken snatches, and the fragile Hindus went down like flies, despite his unceasing efforts; while Kinloch cantered around on his bay waler, heading back villagers who were for ever wandering off to infected places, and cheerfully drinking thereat when they were thirsty.

The days dragged by, and the pestilence stalked red-handed through the land; men dropped at the roadside, and died where they fell; women and children went out like candles blown by a gust of wind. Everywhere was death and the horror of pestilence; the parched earth cracked and panted in the heat; the close, stifling air was abominable with the smell of the sulphur fires and the rotting corpses that lay by the roadside and in the fields. There were sights unfit to be seen and sounds unfit to be heard, and no amount of work could keep pace with the death-roll or bury all those that fell shrieking in their last agony.

The clouds were banking, for the winter was drawing near—the long, cold winter of Northern India—and at the sight of them the weary men in authority took heart, for work killed by inches in the awful heat. Richard's sleeplessness had ceased to trouble him except by fits and starts, and he passed whole days in the saddle, riding from village to village, quarantining the infected villages, directing and supervising the miserable sanitation and scanty hospital accommodation, cheering the sick, giving out medicines to the head-men of the villages, and seeing that they were properly administered,

and rousing the terrified people to take their share of the work, and not sit waiting for death.

Telegrams came from headquarters, but Richard was not used to regarding telegrams very seriously. In such a crisis only the man on the spot could tell what needed to be done and what left undone, and the telegrams were read and tossed aside. The growing ill-favour at home with which he was being regarded also ceased to trouble him, for stern realities held him now, and his days were spent endeavouring to save life.

"Don't forget you're only human, Cavanagh," Scott said, meeting him by the ford on his way to the hospital. "We can't afford to have you down, you know; and you're looking pretty done up."

Richard drew his handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped his face.

"I'm all right," he said. "How's Morgan?"

Morgan was a young subaltern only recently gazetted.

"Died this morning," was the answer. "He's going to be buried this afternoon. Will you do it?"

"Yes. Shall I go over now? Any more cases since I saw you?"

"Ten more. Wilkins is dead, and Nur Khan, and I don't think Mellishe will pull through. God! What a hell this place is!"

Richard moved in his saddle, sitting back for a moment's rest; his eyes, black-shadowed and hollow, scanning the arid, desolate landscape, the lines of his face gaunt and grim under the brim of his hat.

"Yes, it's pretty bad, isn't it?" he said bitterly. "And it might have been saved—at least, a great part of it, if we could have finished the reservoir. Curse those fools at home! I wish I had them here. Hullo! More work for you!"

A woman, crossing the dusty road from the mud hovels of the bazaar to the parched stretch where the hospital stood, paused by the slow trickle of evil-smelling water that marked the river's course, bent double, then dropped to the ground shrieking. Scott wheeled his pony and cantered across to her, while Richard rode on to the hospital to visit the sick and bury young Morgan.

He read the service with the fluency of much sad practice—the words were familiar enough nowadays, for there was no chaplain at Kultänn—and stood a moment by the rough

grave when he had ended. Around him lay the flat, sandy, arid stretches of country; broken by the rocky slopes of the nearer hills, and far away, to the north and west, the long snowy line of the Himalayas. The mud-walled town lay on the farther side of the stony, dried-up watercourse, squalid and evil-smelling in the dreadful heat; behind him, a quarter of a mile away, was the poor little hospital; and to his left, the broad tonga-road running to join the railway at Thäl, twenty miles distant.

A blue-clad figure crawled along the road in the distance—some Sikh fanatic travelling to a matim-kotah to pray for his dead—but with that exception the whole dreary landscape held no visible living thing, for the coolies who had dug Morgan's grave had hurried back to the hospital.

Utter silence surrounded him; the air was hot, and close, and dead, and overhead hung a pall of blue-black cloud; the rain that would herald the winter was very near.

There was nothing in all that arid desolation to suggest any ideas but those of suffering and horror, yet, as Richard stood there, his thoughts flew over that far-off snowy line against the threatening sky, and before his aching eyes came the face of a woman—a fair, proud face, with lovely tender lips and dark, wondrous eyes. The vision was very gracious, and a faint smile crept unconsciously to his lips; then he started violently, for someone spoke his name aloud.

"Richard! Richard! Richard!"

He glanced sharply behind him. There was no one there. He was absolutely alone . . . and the woman whose voice he had heard was thousands of miles away.

He swallowed once or twice—then conquered his momentary fear, for a thought occurred to him, wild enough, yet strangely welcome. He closed his eyes and stood very still listening in the hot silence. If he could hear her speak to him, surely she would hear him answer?

He waited a moment, holding his breath, then spoke quietly and very distinctly:

"What is it?" he said. "Evelyn . . . what is it?"

Silence answered him, and he opened his eyes and jerked back his shoulders as though in scorn at himself; but as he turned away his eyes fell on the newly-made grave. He stopped a moment, and his face softened.

"You lucky beggar!" he said, just below his breath. "Oh, you lucky beggar!"

He entered the small whitewashed hospital, crammed to overflowing with the sick and dying, and reeking of carbolic acid and chloride of lime, and there went from bed to bed, careless of his own danger, heartening those who were frightening themselves to death, by the mere fact of his presence and strength. He paused to hush a man screaming with pain and wild with fear, leaving him with lips locked to silence, and a faint courage creeping to life in his heart; stopped to say a word of encouragement to Scott's frightened native assistant, and then went on to Mellishe's bed.

The young officer lay with closed eyes and pinched nostrils, his breathing very faint and slow, a grey shade round his mouth; he had all but reached the stage of collapse, and Richard's heart sank as he looked at him. As he sat down by the side of the bed, however, Mellishe opened his eyes, and his blue lips formed a faint whisper.

"Hullo! . . . are you . . . all right?"

Richard's hand rested on the sick man's shoulder for a moment; he smiled down into the ghastly face—that rare, charming smile which made men and women his slaves.

"Absolutely fit," he said. "And so must you be; you're wanted badly, old man . . . the Colonel's horribly overworked . . . it's for the sake of the regiment, old fellow . . . for the sake of the regiment."

Was it his fancy? or did something of the greyness fade from about the sick man's face as he spoke? He hardly dared to hope, but stood there, waiting and watching, and by-and-by, Scott, coming up behind him, glanced over his shoulder and lifted his brows in amazement, for Mellishe was sleeping.

By five o'clock Richard had left the hospital and was riding home through the stifling air, under the hot blackness of the sky, past the sulphur fires which blazed at the street corners; past the houses where women wailed and mourned their dead; past the little aimless groups which gathered here and there, whispering together, laying themselves open to the scourge through sheer terror. They rushed forward as he rode by, clinging to the stirrups, crying to him for help, and, even as he stopped to speak to them, a woman fell dead, with the cry on her lips, and a shriek of horror rose from those near her. The bodies of the dead lay by the roadside, for, work as they might, those in authority could not keep pace with the Destroyer, and Roy shied at them as he passed.

Richard's face grew grimmer as he rode into the compound—pestilence was abroad, and there was a smell as of Death itself in the close, foul air.

He went into the office, to find it empty, then to his study, where he found Kinloch answering an important dispatch. He flung himself into a chair, with a sigh of exhaustion, and closed his eyes for a moment's rest.

A second later Kinloch uttered such a heavy sigh that he opened them sharply and sat up.

"What's up, Bobby?" he demanded, and Kinloch looked at him with a puzzled, bewildered look, and got to his feet, leaning heavily upon a chair. Richard sprang up, with a cold fear stabbing at his heart: he knew the answer before it came.

"I don't know . . . I feel stupid . . . and ill : . . ."

He swayed as he stood, his face blanching, and Richard strode across the room, lifted him in his arms, and carried him to his bedroom, agony in his heart.

Scott came up in a few moments, and for two days they made a gallant fight for Kinloch's life, but the cruel disease was heavy upon him, and from the first Scott despaired. Every spare moment Richard had, he spent by the boy's bedside, and on the third day Kinloch opened weary blue eyes and smiled faintly up at his chief.

"I say . . . do take care of yourself, sir," he whispered. "It's awfully . . . rough . . . on you . . . my going out . . . like this."

Richard bent down, chafing his ice-cold fingers; he spoke roughly, for his heart was very full.

"Don't talk rot, Bobby," he said. "You're not going out. You can't leave me with all this on my hands," he added, trying to cheer him by a miserable little joke.

The smile deepened a little, and the blue lips framed themselves into feeble words.

"Awfully . . . sorry, sir!"

"What's the good of saying that unless you buck up?" Richard asked. "Bobby . . . get better!"

Kinloch smiled again, a very faint smile that just curved his mouth, and Richard looked round helplessly. Scott, who was watching from the foot of the little camp-bed, poured some brandy into a glass, handed it to him, and he slipped his arm under Kinloch's head and, raising him very gently, held it to his lips. Kinloch's eyes unclosed as the rim of the glass touched his mouth.

"More . . . beastly . . . medicine?" he said weakly, and swallowed it with long pauses between the gulps.

When Richard put the glass aside he frowned a little.

"Why . . . it was only water," he said, and turned puzzled eyes from one to the other of the two men.

Scott's face contracted; he turned away abruptly, and Richard slipped on to one knee by the little low bed so that he could hold the boy more easily.

Ramshar Khan, superbly careless of personal danger, entered the room noiselessly, and whispered to Scott, who glanced at the bed and then followed him from the room, and at that Richard knew the end was very near. Scott could do no more, and he was needed elsewhere.

The room was very dark, for the blue-black clouds shut the light and air from the gasping parched earth; in the dead, close air of the little room there was absolute silence for a while, broken at last by Kinloch's voice, feeble but clear:

"She always looked stunning . . . didn't you know? Yes . . . why it's the same colour as mine . . . that pony's mouth's too hard . . . bally shame to lather the little chap like that, though. . . . Violet . . . Violet. . . ."

The voice died away again, and Richard's face grew ashen in the ghastly twilight: he looked down at the boy's face resting in the crook of his arm. Seen now, it was extraordinarily like that other—the face of the woman who had ruined his life; yet even so, his heart held nothing but tenderness for him, and he knelt hour after hour cramped and suffering, alone in the darkened room, till quite suddenly Kinloch stirred from the stupor that had followed the few poor words. He opened his eyes very slowly, groping for something through the grim twilight; then they rested on Richard's, and were content.

"Ah . . . you're . . . there" he breathed, and Richard held him a little closer.

"Yes, Bobby," he said gently, though something seemed to choke him, and Kinloch's glazing eyes smiled and closed. He moved his head a little, nestling it more easily on Richard's arm, shivered, and lay still.

Richard bent closer and looked at him, then very gently withdrew his arm and rose to his feet.

He was cramped and stiff, and he swayed a little as he stood, but after a minute or two the worst of the cramp passed away. He stood for a moment looking down at the young

dead face, bent and touched the boy's forehead with his lips, then walked steadily out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Ramshar Khan met him in the passage and paused a moment. Richard spoke quietly.

"Kinloch Sahib is dead," he said, and the old Pathan bowed his head.

"Hai mai! God has chosen it. Heaven-born, will you not take some food? See, I will bring you tea . . . it is good in this heat."

He was turning away, but paused abruptly and went out on to the verandah, his head flung up, his nostrils working. Then he uttered an exclamation, and rejoined Richard.

"Praised be God! the rains are breaking yonder."

Far out over the parched plain the clouds had broken, and before Richard had finished the tea Ramshar Khan brought him; they had come with a roar and a rush, and the compound, lately an arid, dusty square of hard earth, was a rain-lashed sheet of water.

Richard put on heavy boots and a mackintosh and fought his way down to the cholera sheds through the storm, his head bent to meet the fury of the wind. All around him now, in place of the ghastly silence of the heat, was noise—the noise of the rushing torrent that swept down the dried bed of the stream, the roar and shriek of the wind, the hissing and gurgling of the rain pouring from the roofs and splashing along the roads.

Richard ran into the Colonel close to the sheds, and the Colonel asked no questions. Scott had already told him all there was to know; but he scanned Richard's face closely through the gloom and the rain.

"Go and get some brandy, Cavanagh," he said, by way of greeting. "You'll take a chill if you don't."

"I must see about the huts by the river first," Richard answered. "They may be flooded out . . . how are the men?"

"Dying like flies!" the Colonel answered bitterly, his bitterness not hiding his grief, and went on to his evening round of the men with harshly set face.

Richard returned to his bungalow late that night, dreading its silence, sick at heart with all he had seen and all that was still to come, yet hardly able to believe that Kinloch would not presently come into his room with his cheery smile and

greeting. The English mail had arrived that day. There were official letters to answer, reports to send in, arrears of correspondence to make up, and he bathed, changed, and sat down at his writing-table, knowing that no sleep would come to him that night. He wrote some letters, swallowed a mouthful or two of food, then leant back in his chair, pressing his hands over his eyes to shut out the light, for the old trouble of a month back was tormenting him again, and there were strange flecks and sparks between his eyes and the papers on the table.

After a few minutes he dropped his hands and sat idle for a moment, careless of the unopened letters at his side.

The bungalow was wrapped in silence ; outside was the rush of the pouring rain and the howl of the wind, but indoors there was not a sound. Scott, who was staying with him, was already asleep in his room, and the servants were in their own quarters.

Richard's mouth quivered, then hardened. A question of Evelyn's came into his mind.

"Are you not very lonely sometimes?"

He had answered it carelessly enough, but now he understood, at last, what utter loneliness meant. For six years Kinloch had worked with him, and now he was dead. Dead ! Three days ago he had been well and strong, working desperately, yet never for an instant losing heart or courage—now he lay in the next room, still and quiet in his last long sleep.

The intolerable pain of it stung Richard into action. He sprang from his chair, and began striding up and down the room, trying to get away from the horror that had seized him, trying to cheat himself into the belief that it was all a mistake, and that in a few moments Kinloch would open the door and come to speak to him.

Presently he went out into the passage, took a lamp, and went into the room where the boy lay. Chill struck him as he entered—the strange chill that is in the presence of Death ; but he set down the lamp and went over to the camp-bed. Bobby had died peacefully ; very little suffering had been his ; and now as he lay there, there was an extraordinary likeness between him and his sister—a likeness that stabbed Richard to the heart. He stood there gazing at him, looking his last on the face that brought so vividly to mind the woman he had loved and would never see again.

The last link was broken now ; the last thing gone of all he had so dearly loved. The ache at his heart grew bitter with envy of the boy lying there so still and cold, waiting for the burial, that in less than an hour would take place. For the second time, careless of possible danger, he bent down and kissed the dead forehead with lips that quivered ; then turned away and went back to his lonely room.

The letters stared up at him, and, sitting down, he began to open them mechanically, feeling no interest in their contents. There was one from Gifford, and he read it, not comprehending its purport, and another from Sir George Duncombe, and the tone of both was the same—that of warm affection mingled with indignation. Indignation about what ? He picked up his brother's letter, and, frowning hard, tried to make himself understand what it was all about. He tried to see the words distinctly, but it was difficult, for the sparks of light danced between his eyes and the paper ; but at last he made it out, and then for a few minutes his wearied brain grew clear.

He laid down the letter, and took up the last unopened envelope. It bore the Simla postmark, and with grimly set face he tore it open and began to read.

The letter was unofficial, and its kindness was unexpected, but Richard saw quite plainly what he was expected to do. It was not possible that he could be formally accused of causing Leighton's death, but the circumstances were so peculiar that only those people who knew him personally would entirely acquit him. Public feeling against him was very high ; the whole matter was unpleasantly serious ; his work had not been entirely satisfactory, recently, to the Government at home, it was thought that a great deal of unnecessary expenditure had been incurred in the district, and the attack on his personal character was most damaging to the welfare of the entire province. An official announcement that he had been granted indefinite leave, would follow.

Richard sat absolutely still when he had finished the letter, every muscle rigid, his eyes half shut and glittering under their scowling brows, his face very white. After a while he drew his chair to the table, took up a pen and began to write rapidly, his only sign of agitation being in his hurried uneven breathing. When the letter was finished, he sealed and directed it, put it ready with the others, and, leaning forward, buried his face in his hands.

He was conscious now that his head was aching dully, and

that his limbs felt heavy, but he took no notice of it, and after a while raised his head, drew some papers towards him, preparing to write, when suddenly a rifle-shot rang out through the noise of the rain, then another, and another.

He leapt to his feet and ran out to the verandah, waiting for the lightning to show him what was amiss, and at the time a bugle-call resounded from the lines, and a shrieking and clamour arose from the huts on the extreme north of the village.

In a very few minutes Roy was saddled and plunging through the mud, his master leaning low in the saddle, for the rain stung his face and half blinded him.

It was, as Richard thought, a raid, carried out by a Waziri mullah, who was prepared to risk even the dread sickness if he could obtain plunder, but this time he had been nearly trapped by means of a Mohammedan woman, crazy with grief, who had slipped out in the darkness to the desolate burying-ground to mourn over her children's grave. Coming upon her suddenly, he had had her seized, but not before her shrieks had roused the attention of the hospital staff, only a few hundred yards away.

There had been a short scuffle—over before Richard got there—one or two men shot or knifed, and the thieves had galloped off into the darkness, followed, after a very few minutes, by Curtis and a dozen of the Native Cavalry.

Drenched to the skin, the water dripping from him as the horse moved, Richard went the round of the town to see no further mischief was afoot, then up to the hospital. A trooper was waiting at the entrance, and Richard dismounted and threw his reins to him, then entered the reeking lime-washed building. His headache was suddenly extraordinarily worse; his limbs seemed to be made of lead; he reeled as he walked, although he did not know it, and just as Scott came out of the door on his right, a sharp, swordlike pang of agony shot through him. He caught his breath to stifle the cry that almost involuntarily rose to his lips, bent over as though drawn by an invisible power, then, with an effort that brought a cold perspiration to his forehead and turned his face grey with pain, he straightened himself again, breathing unsteadily, saw Scott's face as though through a mist, and knew that the cholera had gripped him at last. He spoke hoarsely, and turned to the door.

"Send me up in a doolie . . . I can't mount . . ." he gasped. "I'm done!"

Scott's heart gave a great bound, then seemed to stop beating; he threw a quick order over his shoulder to a man waiting there, then thrust his arm round Richard and half carried, half helped him into his own room.

The Colonel, waiting for the return of Curtis and his men, splashed his way through the lines and met Willis on his way back from the hospital.

"Have you heard?" he said huskily. "Cavanagh's down!"

"What!" he cried hoarsely. "Cavanagh?"

"Yes, went down an hour ago. It'll take the best, and then, please God! it'll stop."

A lump rose in the Colonel's throat as he turned away, and in the bazaar arose a wailing for the souls that had passed.

CHAPTER XIII

"EVELYN, Evelyn! Here's a letter for you from Mr. Cavanagh!"

Evelyn lifted her head from her book as Nancy came up to her and threw herself down on the grass.

"How nice!" Nancy went on. "Open it quickly and see what he says; and there's a postcard from Gifford. May I read it?"

Evelyn took Richard's letter. "Yes, yes, read it," she said, and paid little attention to Nancy's hurried gabble; in fact, not till the child was dancing with impatience did she lift her eyes from the written page. "What is it?" she said absently. "What did you say? Gifford coming to-night—oh yes—very well." She did not even notice Nancy's stare of amazement, but went back to her letter, for it was two months since she had heard from him, and his letters were doubly precious. It was not very long, more like the jottings of a diary than anything else, but he was well and busy, and she was thankful for his well-being. The last page, however, roused some anxiety in her mind.

"I've just heard Leighton is in India, nominally on State business. I draw my own conclusions, as you will, no doubt, also do. When Kultänn will see him I haven't the vaguest notion, but it will certainly do so sooner or later.

"We are up to our eyes in work. The resettlement has begun, and I've an increase of staff, of two! Think of it! You've no doubt followed the questions and discussions in the House. Pleasant, aren't they? And in consequence I've had orders to reduce expenditure, and the works on the reservoir are shut down, and the railway extension stopped. Of course, it's useless to pretend not to know who we've to thank for it, and all I'm wondering is, where it will end.

"Give my love to Gifford if he is at home, and kiss Nancy for me. Write as soon as you can, Evelyn.

"Yours ever,

"RICHARD CAVANAGH."

Evelyn put the letter back in its envelope and began walking across the garden to the house. She had several things to do before dinner, and it was already growing late. As it happened, not one of these things was destined to be done, for as she entered the house Hilary rushed up to her announcing that Penelope, in a wholly inexplicable fit of rage or jealousy, or both, had murdered and half eaten Jehoiakim, the crow, and her presence was desired at the scene of the slaughter.

By the time Jehoiakim's remains had been decently interred, the unrepentant Penelope chastised, and Alec comforted, it was dressing-time, and Gifford's train was due.

Evelyn had just completed her toilet when there came a knock at her door and Gifford entered. A glance at his face showed her something was amiss, and as she crossed the room to greet him she saw he held an evening paper in his hand.

"This is delightful!" she said as she kissed him. "I dared not hope I should see you before Saturday. Sit down and wait for me. I shall not be a minute."

He took the chair she offered him, close to the wide-open window, and watched her as she moved about the room, putting some things away, a study in cream and gold. The dress she wore was simple, with a very costly simplicity, of some rich ivory-tinted silk, banded here and there with gold embroidery, falling in heavy folds closely to her perfect figure,

and above the creamy whiteness of her shoulders and throat was the lustrous bronze-gold of her hair.

She was very beautiful, very gracious, very satisfying in every movement and poise, possessed of a rare and queenly loveliness at once proud and tender, and Gifford watched her with a sense of supreme contentment in her beauty, very restful to his jaded nerves and worried brain.

The room, too, spoke eloquently of her gracious presence ; its few well-chosen pictures, its many books, its chintz-covered sofa and big comfortable chairs, every knick-nack in it, had some personal value or association ; and on the little writing-table by the window was a big blue-and-white bowl of roses, standing close to a photograph of General Chetwynde. A portrait of Nancy, painted by Hugh two or three years before, hung opposite Gifford where he sat, and all about the room were many photographs of them all, among them being an excellent snapshot of Richard Cavanagh, taken by Hilary. The sight of it brought back the unpleasant happenings of the day to Gifford's mind, and he crushed the paper he held rather savagely, and turned to Evelyn just as she came across to him holding out her arm.

"Will you fasten this bracelet, dear?" she asked. "I can't quite do it."

He rose at once, and as he snapped the clasp, retained her wrist for a moment between his fingers.

"You grow more beautiful every day, Evelyn," he said, looking into her eyes, admiration and tenderness alight in his own, and at his wholly unexpected compliment she laughed softly and the colour deepened in her cheeks.

"Dear old boy, what nonsense! Though it's very charming of you to say so; but you really mustn't make love so delightfully to your own sister!"

"I'm sure you're the safest possible person!" he retorted. "Surely it is better than to other people's sisters? Are we dining alone?"

Evelyn slipped her hand through his arm as they walked towards the door.

"Alas! no. Canon and Mrs. Fisher are coming, and also Miss Brabazon. I'm so sorry, dear, and if I'd only known you were coming I would not have asked them. As it is, I'm afraid nothing can be done."

"No, of course not. It doesn't matter—except—that I've

something to tell you which you had better know now instead of later."

He paused a moment, then handed her the paper.

"Norman Leighton is dead," he said. "It's in all this evening's papers; and he met his death at Kultänn."

Evelyn took the paper with steady hands, and read through the brief notice; her face paled a little, but she did not flinch. She handed the paper back to her brother, and spoke quietly.

"It is very tragic. I wonder how it happened. I suppose the news is authentic?"

Gifford nodded.

"Quite. It's the *Globe*, you see. I suppose he went to Kultänn to see Kinloch."

"Yes, evidently."

"Rough on his wife, though I know they were not the best of friends. I'm sorry it happened at Kultänn, though; it's bad for Dick."

Then, quite suddenly, a realization of all that brief notice meant pierced Evelyn's heart, and her suspicions were confirmed. It was Violet Leighton—and she was free to marry Richard Cavanagh; and a spasm of fierce jealousy took hold of Evelyn, unworthy perhaps, but very human, for she loved him and knew his worth—knew, too, this woman's measure, and of how base a metal she was made. With a sudden impetuosity she crushed the paper between her hands and flung it into a corner; then, brought to herself by Gifford's look of surprise, she endeavoured to excuse her action.

"How stupid of me! I was so annoyed to think it should have happened at Kultänn. I hope you had read the rest of the news?"

"Oh yes, that's all right," he answered; "and as a matter of fact I share your annoyance. The whole circumstance is most unfortunate. Good heavens! Is that seven o'clock striking?"

"Yes, you must go and dress at once, dear. Be quick! And here are the Fishers!"

The sounds of stopping wheels came clearly on the soft still air, mingling with the chiming of the grandfather clock outside Evelyn's door, and Gifford hurried away to change with all possible speed.

For one moment Evelyn waited where she was, waited to regain complete command over herself, waited to fight back the fury of jealousy and pain that was surging within her;

then she shut the door and went downstairs to welcome her guests.

Canon Fisher and his wife were a charming old couple; and Evelyn's pleasure in their society was usually unfeigned; but to-night she wanted to be alone, wanted to fight out the battle that lay before her, wanted to face this new situation and master it.

Owing to Gifford's tardy arrival, dinner was put off for ten minutes, and as they sat waiting Evelyn found herself thanking Heaven that neither the Canon nor his wife had seen the evening papers.

Diana's quick eyes had seen that something had occurred, the instant her cousin entered the room, and realizing that in some way it was connected with Gifford's arrival, she came to the rescue gallantly, and in a very few minutes Gifford came down, with apologies for being the cause of delay, and as Miss Brabazon was announced at that moment they went in to dinner.

Mary Brabazon was the sister of the local doctor, a pleasant, middle-aged woman, plain-featured and kind-hearted, who in the depths of her nature adored Evelyn as much for her beauty as for her charm; but she possessed one grave failing, that of a gossiping tongue, that frequently made mischief where she least intended. To-night, as soon as they were seated at the dinner-table, she plunged headlong into the very topic Evelyn hoped to avoid.

"Have you seen the evening papers?" she exclaimed. "Jack brought in a *Westminster Gazette* just before I left home. There's dreadful news! Mr. Leighton has been murdered in India—Norman Leighton, the Member for Ledbury, you know. Isn't it horrible?"

Diana stopped speaking in the middle of a sentence, and, indeed, a general silence fell for the moment on everyone, but, now that the matter was public, Evelyn was sure enough of herself, and gave no hint of her feelings. Mrs. Fisher was the first to speak.

"Dear me!" she said, her gentle voice full of shocked dismay. "How very sad! Whereabouts did it happen? India you say? For what reason?"

Gifford broke his bread into four tiny pieces, and looked at them intently.

"At Kultänn," he said, rather briefly.

"Kultänn? That's in the extreme north-west, isn't it?"

the Canon inquired, stroking his short, white beard. "Dear, dear! Native work, I suppose?"

"Oh yes! He was found knifed!" Mary Brabazon said. "Jack says he had probably been making himself unpopular up there; or someone may have heard how he had been stirring up matters at home."

"There have been a good many questions asked anent Kultänn lately, have there not?" the Canon went on, turning to Evelyn. "It seems to me that during the early summer and spring there has been some discussion in the House about the North-West Provinces, and I think I am right in connecting Mr. Leighton with the recent questions asked. Is not that so?"

Evelyn turned to him, the words of Richard Cavanagh's letter in her mind as she spoke.

"Yes, you are quite right. Mr. Leighton has been arousing a good deal of interest in India, before he went out there to see for himself whether his ideas on Municipal Government were correct or not."

"Dear me! dear me! These Indian outrages are getting perilously frequent. Now, Mr. Leighton would hardly be the kind of man one would choose as a representative member of the Government, surely?"

"Certainly not!" said Gifford, with some emphasis. "The very last, a Little Englander, a blackguard!"

"My dear Dr. Chetwynde!" the old man exclaimed in gentle reproof. "Remember the man is dead!"

"I do!" Gifford said, rather savagely. "And, deeply though I regret his murder, horrible as it is, yet I must say that he is a man well out of the way. Please don't misunderstand me; my animosity is not personal, I am speaking purely from a political standpoint; but he was a man whose presence was a menace to the Empire, and who stirred up strife and sowed sedition in no small degree."

"I am very ignorant of political matters, I fear," Mr. Fisher put in gently; "but I must say that he does not sound like a good or useful man. Our son is in India, as you know, in Madras, and we can only view any sedition with horror."

"You are a keen Tory, Dr. Chetwynde," Miss Brabazon said. "I should have thought you would have been more a Socialist. Jack—my brother—says doctors must desire social improvement."

Gifford looked across at her.

"Yes," he said, "and old-fashioned enough to still regard loyalty to my King and country as a virtue." There was a moment's silence; then he added, "I certainly do believe in social improvement, in common with most doctors, but I do not think it will be brought about by a policy or a party which shirks our Imperial responsibilities."

Diana, who had remained silent up to the present, listening to the conversation and watching Evelyn, here plunged into the subject in hand.

"It was probably his own fault—Leighton's, I mean," she said; "but it will bring disgrace on the people, and may prove nasty for those immediately in authority, and of course for these reasons I am sorry it has happened, but for no other! I pine for the days when treason was punished with death! It was in those days and under those laws that we grew to be a great nation! Oh, if only I were a man!"

"I am sure you would have made a fine one, Miss St. Juste!" the Canon said heartily; "and I agree with your views. Still, of course, murder is a very terrible and reprehensible thing, and as such must be punished. Has not the murderer been arrested?"

"Not yet. He has probably crossed the Border," Gifford replied. "I should very much like to hear particulars of the matter. It's a wild country, I know, for I was born out there, but it's not a country where an Englishman—and a stranger—gets knifed for no reason whatever, unless he has either very flagrantly transgressed some moral law, or has made a secret enemy by some deliberate act."

"Whose jurisdiction is it?" Miss Brabazon inquired. "I mean, who will have to find the murderer and try and condemn him when he is found?"

"The District Officer. He is ruler and judge in one, of his own district."

"Indeed? And who is he in this particular case?"

It was Evelyn who answered, her voice quite clear and unconcerned.

"Mr. Cavanagh, Mr. Richard Cavanagh. He is a very great friend of ours—of Gifford's and mine."

"Mr. Cavanagh?" Mary Brabazon echoed. "Mr. Cavanagh? Why, surely he was staying with you, here, about two years ago? Nearly two years, was it not?"

"Yes," Evelyn answered. "The same."

The Canon turned to Gifford.

"That is bad," he said. "It will be bad for him, will it not? I remember him now, a most delightful man. Surely a friend, too, of Sir George and Lady Duncombe's?"

Gifford nodded; his face was rather tense, the lines of it grim and deep.

"Yes. He is a great friend of theirs and of mine," he said, "and you are right; it will be a bad thing for him, as it has taken place at his headquarters."

The Canon nodded.

"Ah, I thought so! A pity, a great pity!"

Diana, still watching Evelyn, saw her fingers tighten round the stem of her wineglass, and came to the rescue.

"What are you growing for the Flower Show this year, Mrs. Fisher?" she asked. "You are exhibiting, are you not?"

Mrs. Fisher's hobby being flowers, she rose to the bait at once and plunged eagerly into a discussion on geraniums, about which Diana knew as little as she did about Greek, but proved herself a good listener.

Just before Nancy came in the drawing-room after dinner, Evelyn turned to her guests:

"If you don't mind, please don't mention Mr. Leighton's murder before Nancy," she said; "she will ask endless questions, and so adores Mr. Cavanagh that she might fret if she thought it would cause him any trouble."

Miss Brabazon nodded.

"Of course not. It is never wise to discuss such matters before a child, is it? And Nancy has such imagination. Here she is!"

Nancy came in, tall and slim in her white frock, greeted her sister's guests, and went across to Mrs. Fisher, with whom she was an especial favourite.

At the Canon's request, Evelyn went to the piano, and at that Gifford uttered a little contented sigh and sat down to listen.

"Play the 'Schumann Warum,'" he said, and Evelyn glanced across at him and gave him a little understanding smile; then the smile faded, and she began to play.

The afterglow of the sunset still lingered in the west, but the stars were coming out one by one in the deep blue of the higher heavens, points of silver in the velvet softness of the dusk, and in the east, above the water-meadows and along the wooded horizon was a misty radiance, a wonderful veiled

shining, herald of the moon that was soon to rise. The two windows of the drawing-room stood open on to the broad gravel walk, and the warm, scented air filled the room with fragrance, while in the silence of the summer night the music alone had voice.

From the Schumann, Evelyn wandered to Chopin, then to Brahms and back to Schumann, ending with the first movement of the "Fantasia," and Gifford lay back in his chair, watching her, the tired lines gradually fading from about his mouth and eyes, and the worried frown disappearing from his brows.

The soft light from the shaded lamps seemed to gather and expend itself with a kind of tender radiance round her as she played, round the white and gold of her dress and the beauty of her down-bent head and remote, serious eyes; and Gifford, who had seen sad sights and dealt in dreadful things, found the graciousness and peace of the quiet room and the loveliness of the woman who filled it with such exquisite beauty of sound, healing his hurts and answering many a vexed and troubled question.

As Evelyn commenced the "Fantasia," a slight movement in the room made him turn his head, and see framed in one of the open windows, Hugh, tall and slim and handsome, in his evening clothes, his eyes on Evelyn's face, alight with an almost passionate tenderness and admiration.

The last exquisite notes fell upon the air and died to silence, and after a scarcely perceptible pause Evelyn rose and closed the piano, then saw her brother, and uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

"Hugh! Why, Hugh! I hadn't the least idea of seeing you! How delightful! When did you come?"

Hugh kissed her, and laughed as he entered the room, bringing with him an extraordinary air of youth and vitality.

"Just half an hour ago. How d'you do, Mrs. Fisher? How d'you do, Miss Brabazon? How d'you do, Canon? How jolly of you all to be here! I wanted to see you all so much, for it's ages since I've been home! Isn't it a glorious evening?"

The dreamlike peace enfolding the room had quite fled at Hugh's entrance, and in its place came the eagerness and joy of living. Hugh laughed and chatted and flirted desperately with Mary Brabazon, teased Nancy into helplessness

laughter, and reduced even the Canon to playing absurd games.

"You pin a piece of paper on your back," he explained, "and on that paper is written the name of some famous person, living or dead. Evelyn, for instance, is Sophocles, or David Garrick, or Lucretia Borgia, and she is allowed to ask one question—in turn—at a time about it, like this: 'Am I a man or woman?' or, 'Am I a writer?' 'Am I a king?' till you find out who you are, and the answer must only be yes or no. Of course, you know everybody else's except your own. Do let's play. I'll write the list!"

He tore up suitable bits of paper, and pinned them to everyone's back, and in a few moments Gifford was walking about, labelled Xantippe, and gentle old Mrs. Fisher was endeavouring to find out if she were really Attila or not.

Later on, after everyone was tired of laughter and Canon and Mrs. Fisher were waiting for their carriage, the matter which had so engrossed them all earlier in the evening came up, and Mary Brabazon turned to Hugh.

"You've heard the news, of course?" she said. "We're all so interested about it, because, of course, we know Mr. Cavanagh is a great friend of Dr. Chetwynde's and has stayed down here, and that this dreadful affair happened in Mr. Cavanagh's district. What do you think of it all?"

Hugh's face grew suddenly grave; he spoke very clearly and quickly.

"Oh yes, I've heard it," he said. "It's rather a horrid business—murders are always horrid—but if a man will stir up sedition and rebellion in a country like India and play the traitor to his own country and blood, he mustn't grumble if some native, more loyal than himself, shows him his mistake. That's all."

Mary Brabazon nodded, and Hugh opened the door for her with an angry flame in his eyes, for in his position as private secretary to Cavanagh, he foresaw more clearly, even than Gifford, that the business of Leighton's murder might prove excessively unpleasant in its consequences to Richard.

"Can we drive you as far as the corner, Miss Brabazon?" the Canon inquired, as they prepared to depart, but she shook her head and declined the offer, saying she preferred to walk, which preference annoyed Hugh exceedingly, since it meant that he must, in common decency, offer her his escort.

This was exactly what Miss Brabazon was waiting for, and

as they set out together along the straight half-mile stretch of road that lay between Pangley Chase and the town, she plunged at once into the subject uppermost in her mind.

"I am sure you must be most interested in this dreadful affair," she began, "you are so much more in the thick of things. I suppose Mr. Cavanagh—Mr. Richard's brother, I mean—will hear the truth of everything."

Hugh kicked a stone into the ditch, and wondered what she meant.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he said, "we all know the truth—Norman Leighton has been murdered, and at Kultänn. That's all."

Mary Brabazon paused a moment. She was nearly sure that Hugh's tone was secretive, that he was hiding something; also, she was trying to remember something she had once heard in connection with Richard Cavanagh's name. She had forgotten all about it till to-night's conversation had brought it partially to her mind. Who was it that had spoken of him, and where?

She traversed the next hundred yards in silence, whereat Hugh was relieved, for the last thing he wished to discuss at present was the murder—or its circumstances. He congratulated himself too soon, for as they drew near the first two houses on the road—one occupied by Canon and Mrs. Fisher—Mary Brabazon spoke again.

"The whole matter is so dreadfully unfortunate, isn't it? Mr. Norman Leighton, too—and of course people will talk, won't they? even though it's two years ago."

Her puzzled memory had its reward, for Hugh stopped short in his walk, then muttered something, and went on more rapidly.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?" he said.

Mary Brabazon quite jumped at his tone; it was so peremptory; but she stuck to her guns bravely. Her chance shot had told, and she did not intend to lose the advantage she had gained.

"Of course you know better than I can possibly do," she said; "but I rather imagined there had been some talk about Mr. Richard Cavanagh and Mrs. Leighton. Didn't they flirt a great deal when he was at home? Of course I don't know—it's probably gossip—but I just wondered, you know."

Hugh drew a deep breath, and did not answer for a moment;

he had learnt much since he had been in town, but he had not quite learned that wise discretion of the tongue that, in cases like this, is the only safe course to pursue. He adored Richard Cavanagh, and for the moment he let his enthusiasm rule his head.

"Good heavens! How absurd!" he exclaimed. "Richard Cavanagh's not a bit that sort of man! He's not the sort of man that runs after other men's wives; he's far too straight! Why, it's ridiculous! And he's——"

Quite suddenly he stopped. Not because he did not believe the truth of what he was saying, but because there flashed into his mind the remembrance of the gossip he had heard about Richard Cavanagh when first he went to Berkeley Square. His sudden pause was the unwise thing possible, and his companion could not fail to notice it; she did more, and registered it as proof positive of the matter about which she had spoken. She was so interested that she did not speak, and after a moment Hugh spoke again.

"There's always gossip about everybody," he said, "at least, about anybody who's done anything worth doing. It's a sort of hall-mark—a patent—and the more you're talked about, the bigger you are."

Mary Brabazon checked a little sigh of regret, for they had reached her home, a white stone house, facing immediately on the street, with

JOHN BRABAZON

PHYSICIAN AND SURGEON

inscribed on a brass plate on the door, and oak-grained outside shutters to all the windows.

Never had Mary Brabazon been so regretful on reaching home; never before had she wished to live at the farther end of the town, as she did now, for she felt herself on the very verge of a dramatic discovery.

As it was, she merely nodded, and hunted for the latchkey, which she carried in a little white pocket tied round her waist underneath her dress.

"I thought I had heard of something of the sort," she said, "but of course, as you say, one can never credit gossip."

"Not of this most certainly, for it's too absurd," Hugh said, very forcibly, "and I don't suppose we shall hear any

more of the murder, or Leighton, or anyone. Good-night. It's been so jolly seeing you."

He shook hands, then swung round and started on his walk back along the silent moonlit street, and into the open country. He traversed the half-mile of straight road between the last outlying houses and Pangley Chase in a remarkably short space of time, for he was in anything but an amiable frame of mind.

He swung in at the gate, saw the lights were out in the drawing-room; that there was a light in Evelyn's bedroom; but that Gifford's window, which was next to hers, was still dark, and at that he experienced a feeling of relief, for he rather wanted to see Gifford. He let himself in and made his way to the study; the rest of the downstairs rooms were in darkness, for Evelyn and Diana had both retired, but a line of light still showed under the study door and he went towards it.

Gifford looked up as he entered and closed the door behind him.

"You've soon got back," he said. "Have a cigarette?" Hugh took one from the box.

"Thanks," he said. "Yes, I've hurried; I wanted to see you before you went to bed."

Gifford lifted his eyebrows.

"To see me? Indeed? What is it?"

Hugh began smoking the cigarette very rapidly, careless of the fact that it was charring all down one side.

"It's not about myself," he said; "it's about this confounded Leighton murder."

The half-bantering expression left Gifford's face; he put aside the book he held and turned to face his brother, his attitude betokening close attention.

"Well, what of it?" he said. "Do you know more than we do about it?"

Hugh thought for a moment.

"No," he replied, "not exactly, but I'm sure of one thing. It's going to be very unpleasant for Mr. Cavanagh—Richard Cavanagh."

Gifford frowned.

"Why?" he asked sharply.

"Because—oh—how much do you know?"

Gifford threw his cigarette into the fire, and leant forward, his eyes on his brother's.

"Hugh," he said, "all I know is that Leighton has been murdered by a native at Kultänn. He probably deserved it . . . for the moment that doesn't very much matter. It's unfortunate for Richard that it's taken place at his own headquarters, in his district ; but how's it going to be bad for him ? Speak plainly. You know what Richard's welfare means to me."

Hugh, too, threw away his cigarette ; he felt he needed all his attention to enable him to put his fears into definite form.

"It's just this," he said. "When Cavanagh was home—he—he got himself talked about—with Mrs. Leighton. Of course, everyone who is as public a person as he was while he was on leave is almost bound to be talked about one way or another ; but this was definite. It's quite true that he did go about with her a good bit, and he did go to see her a good deal. Well, of course we know he's straight, if ever a man was, but the people who talk don't know it ; and now that this affair's happened they'll remember that Richard Cavanagh's name was coupled with Violet Leighton's two years ago, and there was a good deal of gossip . . . and then they'll begin to talk again, and if the talk gets any way on, don't you see how very ugly the affair will look ?"

"But good heavens !" Gifford broke in. "Surely no one——"

Hugh interrupted him.

"Kultänn has been in bad odour for some time—this affair won't improve it. I know I'm only talking on suspicion, but still, I'm pretty sure I'm right. Now do you see what I mean ?"

For some minutes Gifford sat quite still ; he saw quite well now, and Hugh saw that he saw, and waited to hear what he should have to say about it. A portrait of Richard Cavanagh stood on the writing-table close to Gifford's elbow, and Hugh's eyes wandered to it as he waited. It had been taken just before Cavanagh sailed, and was an excellent likeness, the pose of the head being a little more than profile, allowing a fuller sight of the strong mouth and chin and steady eyes. The fine lines of the jaw and cheek, the bold cut of the nostril, and the whole position of the head had a rather dogged look that spoke volumes for the man's iron will. Hugh's eyes rested on it with a world of admiration in their depths ; he thought more of Richard than of

any man living, and envied Gifford his close friendship with him.

Gifford followed his gaze after a while and saw it resting on Richard's photograph; then he knocked out his pipe and spoke:

"I see your point. I hadn't realized the situation. You're right. It's a bad one."

Hugh leant forward, clasping his hands together, speaking eagerly.

"Of course it's utterly and completely idiotic. Cavanagh is a man in a thousand. Still, people will say things, and the things will do him harm. Gossip of that kind is bound to do him harm."

Gifford nodded.

"Yes, of course it is; but I don't see what is to be done at present. We can't announce his innocence with a flourish of trumpets. Besides—there are years of work behind him."

"Yes, I know; but that won't prevent this beastly business being the worst thing in the world. There are plenty of people willing and waiting to stir up a scandal, merely for the sake of the excitement. Of course, I can see there's nothing to be done—that we've just got to lie low, but I wanted to tell you about it, to see what you thought."

Gifford put his pipe down and rose.

"I'm afraid I haven't helped you much," he said; "but at the present moment I don't see what can be done. I think it's a question of sitting tight and waiting for the next move."

Hugh rose too, and stifled a yawn.

"Yes; but if people do talk in my hearing, I shall want to smash them," he said. "By the way, I forgot to tell you, I've got three days off. The chief is going to Balmoral. Good-night."

Gifford followed him upstairs, and shut his door very quietly, for fear he should disturb Evelyn, but for a long while he lay awake, gazing out into the scented moonlit air, and thinking over the possibilities Hugh's words had aroused in his mind.

Pangley, like most small country towns, had its small excitements and social gatherings; these latter occasionally patronized by "the county," in the persons of Sir George and Lady Duncombe and a few neighbouring landowners, and the chief of these gatherings was the local flower show, which took place a fortnight later, in early August, in the

grounds of the Grange, a large and modern house, belonging to a retired butcher named Hodges, who felt himself to be admitted to the number of the elect when he beheld the Viscountess Ravensly or Lady Duncombe walking about on his extensive lawns, or partaking of ices in his brilliantly striped marquees.

The morning of the day dawned fair and very hot, so hot that Evelyn felt disinclined to do anything, and looked longingly at the chairs in the shade of the fir-trees ; but as it happened there was a good deal to do. Just as she was starting into the town for her morning shopping, came a telegram from Hugh, saying he would be down about three that afternoon, and Evelyn had to stay to give the necessary orders for his room to be got ready. Gifford might come, or might not ; his movements were seldom to be depended on, but he must be prepared for, and she was so busy that she did not start to do her shopping till nearly twelve o'clock, and had not even glanced at the morning papers.

Diana, cool and lazy, was lounging in a deck-chair in the shade, perusing the paper, when the second post arrived ; she put the paper down on the grass, and opened her letters idly, because she had just enough curiosity left to want to see whom they were from. A sentence in one of them made her pause.

"Mrs. Norman Leighton has married again ten days ago. Isn't it appalling ! And her husband has only been dead about a fortnight. Boris Liadov is the man—some Russian Prince with heaps of money. I wish them joy of each other. Of course, everyone will cut her, but, as she's going to Vienna, it won't matter."

Diana folded the letter and yawned. Mrs. Leighton had certainly wasted no time. She picked up the paper again, and began the political news. In one of the columns Richard Cavanagh's name caught her eye, and she began to read more attentively. It was nothing important, however, as far as she could see—merely a comment on one of his reforms. Diana was not versed enough in the ways of the Foreign Office to see how very biting the comment was.

Meanwhile, midway along the sunny length of South Street, Evelyn overtook Nancy, swinging along on her way back from school, who, on seeing her sister, exclaimed joyously :

"Evelyn ! I've had such a row with Sibyl Grainger !"

Evelyn smiled down at her.

"Have you? Why?"

Nancy swung her satchel against a gate in passing, and jerked back her tangled curly hair. "She saw something I keep in my history-book. Look!"

She extricated a battered history from the satchel, and thrust it, open at the fly-leaf, under her sister's nose. Pasted on the leaf was a villainously bad print of Richard Cavanagh, cut from an old *Graphic*.

Evelyn smiled and nodded.

"Well, dear?"

"She said she was surprised I had it, as *she* shouldn't be at all proud of his acquaintance; and when I said why, said he was a rotter! Said her father said he was messing things up out in India, and getting himself into thoroughly hot water with the Government here. And so I said that I wasn't in the habit of saying horrid things about my friends behind their backs, and that I thought only rotters themselves said the things—and so we had an awful row!"

She paused a moment, evidently regretful for past opportunities, then looked up at her sister.

"Wasn't it low down of her?" she said.

"Very!" Evelyn replied, "and I think your championship was splendid! Have you many lessons to-day?"

"Not many; if I get to them directly luncheon's over I can get everything done before it's time to dress, except my Euclid."

"You must be quite ready by half-past three, dear; Lady Duncombe is going to call for us just after then."

"Oh, how jolly! Yes, I'll be ready. I'm to wear my new frock, aren't I? The blue one?"

"Yes. Hugh is coming down by the four o'clock train, so we shall have a delightful evening, shan't we?"

"Rather! Ooh! I'm hot!"

This was scarcely to be wondered at, for the day was typical of what August days should be and so seldom are, with blazing sunshine and cloudless heavens, and the air quivering with heat over the stretch of dusty white road.

Nancy was exceedingly untidy; her blue serge kilt was dusty; her white drill man-o'-war blouse rumpled, the black tie twisted, the collar curled up at the corners; her straw man-o'-war hat, burnt brown with the sun, and crammed anyhow on to her hair, which was sticking in wet rings on her forehead, and hanging in the wildest tangle about her

face. Her slim little hands, deeply tanned with the sun, were innocent of gloves and smothered in ink, and there was a large inky smudge across her nose ; yet as Evelyn looked at her she felt unutterably proud—proud of the promise of beauty in the face and the slim figure ; proud of the brilliant brain under the tangled curly hair ; above all, proud of the loving loyal nature and brave, fearless courage.

Just as they reached the white gate, Nancy turned to her sister.

“ Evelyn, do you think Mr. Cavanagh’s likely to come home before his next leave ? ” she asked. “ That’s three more years.”

“ I don’t think so,” Evelyn answered, and then caught her breath a little sharply, for the thought crossed her mind that should he return it would be only on special leave for his marriage.

Nancy jerked back her hair.

“ I was afraid not,” she said, rather wistfully. “ Three years is such a long time to wait. I shall be nearly sixteen, Evelyn.”

With a sudden gesture Evelyn put her arm round her shoulders, and stood looking down at her.

“ Ah, don’t grow up, Nancy ! ” she said, and there was a world of passionate supplication in her voice. “ Don’t grow up ! I should miss my little sister so ! ”

Nancy stared at her for a second, then freed her hands, dropped her satchel with a bang, and flung her arms round Evelyn’s neck.

“ I’ll never do anything you don’t want me to do, dearest ! ” she cried. “ I love you better than anything or anybody in the world ! Mr. Cavanagh comes next, but you’re first. Oh, Evelyn ! ”

For one moment Evelyn held her tightly ; then she gave her a long kiss, and laughed softly.

“ What funny people we are, Nancy ! We’ve hours of time in which to say pretty things to each other, and we choose the middle of the drive when your hands are quite full of books—or ought to be ! ”

Nancy picked up the satchel, and rubbed the dust off with her kilt.

“ It hasn’t hurt it ! ” she said airily. “ And we can’t always be certain exactly *when* we shall feel like that ! How nice it is in the shade ! Hullo ! There’s Diana ! Lazy

thing, sitting under the trees. Oh, I must go and get some water ; I'm so awfully thirsty ! ”

She went off at a run, and scrambled through the open dining-room window, leaving Evelyn to saunter towards Diana.

“ How delightfully cool you look ! ” she said enviously, sinking down in a chair beside her. “ What news is there, Di ? Anything interesting ? ”

“ Nothing much. They're still grumbling about Kultänn and Mr. Cavanagh's administration. I should get sick of it if I were he. ”

Evelyn picked up the discarded paper, and read through the brief paragraph.

“ The whole business is so unnecessary, ” she said. “ Kultänn's administration is far and away the best on the entire Frontier ; to my mind these questions are futile, and these criticisms merely impertinent ! What do these men ” — and she tapped the paper impatiently — “ know of the difficulties and hardship to be faced out there ? It's absurd ! ”

Diana nodded ; she thought Evelyn's indignation rather splendid, and the other news she had received went completely out of her head. She had not the remotest knowledge that Mrs. Norman Leighton's marriage would be a matter of any interest to her cousin, and so, naturally enough, forgot to mention it.

“ Well, I suppose it's luncheon-time ! ” she said, lifting her lazy length out of the chair. “ Whew ! how hot it is in the sun, but what heavenly weather ! ”

And, traversing the sunny little lawn side by side, they entered the grateful coolness of the hall to get ready for luncheon.

Nancy, inwardly still raging about Sibyl Grainger (Sibyl ! Whose father said Richard Cavanagh was messing things up ; Sibyl, who jeered at and despised her hero ! Sibyl, who talked about “ those horrid boys ” ; Sibyl, whose hair was always smooth, whose hands were never inky ; Sibyl, who dared to scorn Richard Cavanagh's photograph), outwardly only a trifle quieter than usual, took her place next to Sir George in the carriage and Evelyn merely attributed her silence to excitement, and, indeed, Lady Duncombe's news filled her mind.

“ George had a telegram just before we started, ” Cecile

exclaimed. "Cholera has broken out at Kultänn. Isn't it dreadful?"

For a moment Evelyn stared at her in horror.

"Cholera? At Kultänn?" she echoed, and Cecile nodded.

"Yes. Of course, Dick has been through outbreaks before, but it frightens one just the same. Oh, how I hate India! If only it didn't exist Dick might live safely in England, and the worst thing he would be likely to get would be appendicitis or influenza."

In spite of her anxiety Evelyn uttered a little giggle at this, and Sir George leant forward.

"My dear Cecile, I thought you were an Imperialist!" he said, and she turned on him indignantly.

"So I am. You know I am. I had all the Yelverton children to tea in the park on Empire Day, and I always give big subscriptions to the Primrose League and Tariff Reform, and other dreadfully clever things like that, but I *do* wish Dick could stay at home! There are so many stupid, uninteresting men who would never be missed if they went to India!"

"Cecile's views are hopeless!" Sir George said, laughing. "And Dick would never be content to settle down in England."

The big barouche, with its magnificent pair of greys, rolled luxuriously along the stretch of straight white road that Evelyn had traversed with Nancy only a few hours before, and as it entered the town passed Canon and Mrs. Fisher in their victoria, drawn by a very slow-moving, fat brown cob, and halfway along South Street Evelyn saw Miss Brabazon hurrying along, dressed in a somewhat youthful costume of white muslin.

The Flower Show was like every other flower show in a small town; there were brilliant marquees placed about the lawns; there were several hundred people all arrayed in their best; there was chatter and laughter, and many comments on, and praise of, the flowers themselves; and there was a distinct flutter when Sir George and Lady Duncombe arrived.

Mrs. Hodges, resplendent in black brocaded silk and much jewellery, a very smart and much cspreyed bonnet on the top of her scraped-back grey hair, rustled to greet her, and smiled and bowed in an ecstasy of delight.

"How do you do, Lady Duncombe? How do you do,

Sir George? My husband will be so pleased that you were hable to come! He knows how *much* you are hengaged! Miss Chetwynde, too? 'Ow do you do?"

Nancy drew back rather pointedly as Cecile and Evelyn replied suitably to the effusive greeting, and later on in the afternoon, finding herself alone, went rambling down one of the paths till she came to a bank and hedge that reminded her irresistibly of the day of Lady Duncombe's garden-party, just two years ago, when Richard Cavanagh had found her crouched in a miserable little heap on the grass, watching the scene from afar.

There was a garden-seat just here, and Nancy dropped down on it, her thoughts far away, picturing India as best she might, wondering what Richard Cavanagh was doing and when he would return, dreaming idly of a glorious future day when she should hear of his return, and tell him of her own fame as a world-renowned novelist. She had just pictured the scene of his arrival at Pangleigh with her latest novel in his hand—bound in crimson, or green and gold—with the name in large letters on the back—"By Nancy Chetwynde, author of . . . etc., etc.," when she was roused from dreams of a speculative future to a very real present by hearing Richard Cavanagh's name pronounced quite distinctly by someone on the other side of the hedge.

The sound was so unexpected that Nancy listened, before she thought, to what came next.

"I knew directly, of course, that there was something beneath the whole matter. Richard Cavanagh was staying with them, you know, last summer."

It was Mary Brabazon's voice, and another answered it—that of Mr. Hodges' only son, Tom, just down from Oxford—aged twenty-two, and considering himself very much a man of the world and lord of creation.

"I met him once. Couldn't see much in him myself. Can't imagine what everyone saw in him to rave over."

"He'd done rather big things, I believe, hadn't he?" Mary's voice said. "He had a private audience at Buckingham Palace, you know."

"Oh, he'd tidied matters up a little!" her companion remarked condescendingly. "And, of course, he's one of the Cavanaghs of Roxholm. That means a good deal. There was a great deal too much fuss made over him, I consider—made him lose his head a bit. I dare say it was rather apt

to do so. I thought when I met him that he thought rather too much of himself."

Mary spoke hesitatingly.

"I saw him in church at Yelverton. He was very handsome, I thought."

"Really? Couldn't see it myself. Oh, he's all right to look at, of course; good eyes, you know, and a 'touch-me-if-you-dare' look about him that women adore. Spoilt, of course, and he loves to pose in consequence. Of course, he has a very nice time out at Kultänn. Polo, and dances, and races—usual Simla business. That comes of having a good posting the Hills. I suppose the women all run after him, and pet him from morning till night—has a very good time of it, and then expects the same fuss made over him at home."

"Well, he seems to be in rather bad odour just now," Mary remarked; "the papers seem to be full of him."

"By Jove, yes! He'll find out his mistake! It's always the way with men like that—they get pampered and spoilt in fat berths, like this one of Cavanagh's, and then they overreach themselves, and mess things up. That's what he's done."

The little blue-clad figure behind the bushes thrilled and stiffened.

"Mess things up!"

That was what Sibyl Grainger's father had said, and Nancy clenched her hands and held her breath, careless now of the fact that she was listening to what was not meant for her to hear. They were talking about Richard Cavanagh, talking evil about him, blaming him—Nancy's eyes flashed stormily. Tom Hodges' voice broke the silence.

"This Leighton affair looks nasty. One can't help wondering what's behind it. Cavanagh struck me as the sort of man who wouldn't scruple to crush anyone in his way, and, by Jove! one rather wonders if he had any desire to get Leighton out of the way. Looks deuced fishy to my mind."

Mary Brabazon was the last person in the world to wish to do Cavanagh or anyone else any harm, but her desire for gaining and imparting information amounted to a passion, and she was pining to be first in the field with such news—especially to-day, when she had so great a chance to talk. It never occurred to her that there might be cruelty in such talk, or that she might be setting a dangerous scandal afoot, and so she cheerfully set to work.

"Well, do you know, the same thing occurred to my mind!" she said confidentially. "I must say I don't agree with your estimate of Mr. Cavanagh—he is such a friend of Dr. Chetwynde's and dear Miss Chetwynde that I'm sure he must be nicer than you think—but at the same time I won't deny that what you suggest has crossed my mind more than once. Of course, you know he was talked about when he was at home—Mrs. Leighton, you know—I believe he was quite indiscreet. One never knows, of course, how much to believe of such gossip—still I *have* heard it was quite a serious affair. Really, now, this murder made me think of it all again! So unfortunate! So very unfortunate!"

Nancy did not wait to hear Tom Hodges' reply. She was quite old enough to understand a great deal of what she had heard, and her blood was aflame with a blind fury.

She went back across the grass, saw Evelyn, conspicuous alike for her proud loveliness and in her exquisite pale green dress and big feathered hat, and realized suddenly that she could not go quietly home with her in the Yelverton carriage. She could not bear it—she could not. She was so blindly angry that to sit still and hide her feelings was an impossibility, and some unchildlike instinct warned her against letting Evelyn know anything of the matter.

She stood for a minute or two in the centre of the path trembling with sheer rage, wondering what to do; then, her mind made up, slipped through the thickening crowd and out at the gates.

The Yelverton carriage was a little way down the road, and Charles, six foot three of green liveried manhood, stood by the gate, impassive and immaculate from his powdered hair to his shining boots.

Nancy ran up to him, cheeks flaming, eyes ablaze.

"Will you find Lady Duncombe, and tell her I've gone home, please?" she said. "Tell her in ten minutes. Or Miss Chetwynde; either will do."

Charles touched his hat solemnly, and Nancy set off down the road, walking very fast, quite careless of the fact that she was rather noticeably dressed to be walking alone.

It was a good two miles from the Grange, which was on the extreme northern outskirts of the town, to Pangley Chase, but Nancy was used to walking, and made good time through the town, and it was not till she had passed Mrs. Fisher's

house, which was the last on the London Road, that her speed began to flag.

She had not yet formulated any excuse for her abrupt departure, and she was aware that Evelyn would be displeased, but she had felt the imperative need of action, and had followed the blind instinct to run away to be alone.

She reached the Chase gates at last, and turned in wearily, and the first person she saw was Gifford, lounging in a deck-chair on the lawn, reading a magazine; it was too late to retreat, for he had heard her step, and looked up.

"Hullo, Nancy! Got back? Where's Evelyn?"

Nancy went across to him rather unwillingly.

"She's driving with Lady Duncombe," she replied, and Gifford threw the magazine on the grass.

"Then why are you here? You didn't come alone, did you?"

"Yes."

He looked at her sharply, and she flushed under his scrutiny.

"What on earth for?" he demanded.

For a moment she did not answer. An imperative desire to unburden herself of all she had heard seized her, but she hesitated to speak to Gifford, for she was rather shy of him, and had never been petted or teased by him as she had been by Hugh.

He saw her hesitation and frowned. He was an impatient man, and he did not understand children.

"What is it?" he repeated.

Nancy looked at him with great dark eyes, full of stormy despair; after all he was Mr. Cavanagh's greatest friend—and rather a formidable person. Perhaps he could do something after all.

"It was something I heard," she said hurriedly, standing before him, with slim fingers desperately intertwined and head held defiantly, "and I just couldn't stand it! I had a row about it with Sibyl Grainger this morning, and then—over there"—she jerked her head to indicate the Grange—"the others said it. They said heaps of things about him, horrid things—wicked, untrue things—I hate them all! How dare they be so mean—so beastly mean!"

Gifford was greatly perplexed, but he saw she was in deadly earnest, and waited for her to explain further. She drew a low breath.

"Then they said he was spoilt and sidey, and that he didn't

know how to manage, and that Kultänn was a sort of place where he'd nothing to do but play polo and——”

“*Kultänn?*” Gifford interrupted sharply. “Who are you talking about, Nancy?”

With sudden impatience she stamped angrily.

“Why, Mr. Cavanagh!” she cried. “Oh, don’t you understand? They said it was fishy—that he’d been flirting with Mrs. Leighton—that——”

Gifford sprang up from his chair with a smothered exclamation, and seized her by the shoulder.

“How dare you repeat such stuff?” he demanded sternly. “If you hear such things you ought to know better than repeat them.”

Nancy’s eyes sparkled.

“I’ve only told you!” she cried desperately. “I had to tell somebody—I was just *boiling!*”

Gifford let go her shoulder, and wheeled round.

“I suppose you’ve told Evelyn?” he said.

“No, I haven’t! I’m not going to! But it’s horrid—perfectly horrid!”

Her voice broke a little, but her chin was held as high as ever, and Gifford was suddenly aware that she was very tired and very unhappy. He put his arm round her shoulders, and drew her towards the house.

“You’d better change into another frock,” he said, “it was quite right of you to tell no one but me. Try and forget it.”

“Forget it?” Nancy cried, and wheeled round to face him, with tragedy in every line of her form. “I shall never forget it! Oh—I hate them! I hate them! He’s so good—so splendid—he’s—he’s——” And then, greatly to her own astonishment and disgust, she began to cry.

Gifford was immensely astonished; he had not in the least realized the strength of her devotion to Richard Cavanagh, and her fury of indignation had amazed him; so, too, did her tears, for he had never known her cry before.

“Why, Nancy!” he said gently. “There—don’t cry . . . poor little girl, you’re tired, and I don’t wonder.”

He drew her into the house, and upstairs to his own room, and there sat down and took her on his knee.

“I didn’t know you remembered him enough to be so upset, kiddie!” he said, and at the last word the sobs grew deeper. “What’s that?”

She forgot it was the brother who was such a stranger, and

was only conscious that she was very tired and very miserable, but she lifted her flushed, tear-wet face from his shoulder, and looked at him.

"I remember every word he said!" she exclaimed shakily, "and he always called me kiddie—that's his name—and I love him better than anybody in the whole world—except Evelyn—and, oh, I wish he would come back! I wish he would come back."

The memory of Hugh's words a few weeks before was unpleasantly vivid, and Gifford was quite conscious that he, too, would give a good deal to see Richard back safely; but it would not do to let Nancy know that, so he only stroked her hair caressingly till she mastered her tears, and dried them with a very wet ball of cambric.

After a minute or two she got up, very much ashamed of herself.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said, her cheeks flaming. "I—I don't know why—I was such an idiot. You won't tell anybody, will you, Gifford?"

Gifford smiled.

"Of course not!" he said. "I'll make it all right with Evelyn—and try not to worry over what you hear. Evelyn will explain things to you better than I can. You'd better bathe your eyes. Do it in here, then no one will see you. I'm going down to the garden."

He patted her shoulder, and went out of the room. Richard Cavanagh would have kissed her, but it did not occur to Gifford to do so.

Leaving Nancy to remove all traces of tears, he went slowly downstairs and out into the garden once more, and, lighting a pipe, thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and began to slouch up and down the lawn in a manner peculiarly characteristic of him when working out some difficult problem.

He was not in the least surprised at what he had just heard, for he knew the tendency to gossip that enwraps every country town, but he was exceedingly angry—angry at the needless malice that could find pleasure in such talk, angry at his own utter inability to stop it. It was obviously impossible to go about stating that Richard Cavanagh was an injured hero, and it was equally damnable that his friends should have to stand by and let such scandals go on.

It was evident that there would be plenty of people ready to say very unpleasant things about Cavanagh's relations with

Mrs. Norman Leighton ; and in the light of recent events such gossip would take on a very ugly look. Then, too, if such gossip was already afoot in a country town like Pangley, what would be its dimensions in the atmosphere of London ? It was incredible that idle scandal such as this should damage Richard with the Foreign Office in general, or Lord Denham and Sir Henry Mackintyre in particular, yet such he knew would be the case.

He knew quite well what mischief even one idle remark can make, and in this particular case the slightest suggestion of evil might work irremediable harm.

The Yelverton carriage drew up at the gates, and Evelyn and Diana alighted, bid their friends farewell, and entered the garden. Evelyn's usually serene brow was ruffled ; she was distinctly annoyed at her little sister's behaviour, and although Gifford's arrival gave her pleasure, the annoyance was still there.

When dinner was over, Gifford and Evelyn strolled into the garden, and Gifford listened to her account of the afternoon.

"It was deadly, Gifford ! Absolutely deadly !" she exclaimed. "We all smirked at each other, and we all uttered the same platitudes, and admired the same flowers. We grilled in the sun, and stifled in the tents, and ate ices we did not want to eat, and looked at things we did not want to see. Oh, how I hate these provincial gatherings !"

Gifford drew her arm within his and laughed.

"Why this sudden tirade ?" he asked, and Evelyn's tone startled him in reply.

"Because I'm tired ! Tired of everything ! Tired of the narrowness of life ! Tired of the same faces, the same sights ! Tired of responsibility and work ! Tired of looking on at other people's happiness—tired of fighting—oh, you're surprised—you didn't think it possible I could ever feel or speak like this, did you ? You took it for granted I was quite content with my life, like all the others did ! And so I was—once—but not now—I'm not as strong as I thought I was—I can't bear it any longer ! I feel pent up, stifled, desperate !"

Her voice broke off, and for a moment Gifford stood silent, not knowing what to say or do. Evelyn's outburst had taken him utterly by surprise, and he felt for the minute helpless to answer it. In the dusk her face glimmered as white as her dress, and he could hear her rapid uneven breathing, and see how she was trembling.

A moment longer the silence lasted ; then she spoke more quietly, but with great bitterness :

" I suppose you think I am mad, but I assure you it is not so. I merely want a little of the happiness that others have so abundantly—I want to live my life fully, to become possessed of what lies out of my reach. Oh, it is only a very little that I ask for, is it not ? Merely my right to live—and be happy ! "

She began to move as she spoke, and side by side they paced the length of the path. At its end they faced each other, and Gifford spoke.

" You're right," he said. " God forgive me, I have taken it for granted. You've shown me my mistake. What can I do ? "

Evelyn moved her hands with a gesture at once hopeless and protesting.

" Nothing !," she said very bitterly. " Nothing ! "

He came a step nearer.

" Evelyn, what's behind all this ? " he said, a little hoarsely.

" There is something more that you haven't told me—something you're keeping back."

She lifted her head a little, and looked him straight in the eyes ; in the dusk he could yet see the sombre tragedy of her face, and fear gripped him, for she was the thing he loved best on earth.

" What is it ? " he repeated, and his voice was insistent. " There is something more ; will you not tell me what it is ? "

She drew a step back from him, something of the profound desolation of a winter night sky in her eyes, her hands tightly interlocked, her whole figure eloquent of the immense nostalgia that possessed her.

" I cannot ! " she said very quietly. " It is not wholly mine to tell . . . only . . . like many another woman, I have been very foolish . . . I have dared to dream . . . and the dream is over . . . it has refused to buoy me up any longer. I suppose I am tired, or I should not speak so."

Gifford made no immediate reply ; he was searching for some reason that could satisfy him, some answer to the unexpected demand she had made upon him.

Before he could find words to answer her she spoke again.

" To-morrow I shall be sane again—content, perhaps—but to-night I am rebellious—I want to strike back ; I want to wreak my suffering on others. . . . Strange, is it not ? But part of the eternal order of things nevertheless ! "

She gave a jarring little laugh, and, turning half away, gazed eastwards and southwards, and Gifford, watching her, found his answer suddenly plain before him—so plain, so altogether likely, that he could hardly believe he had not understood it till to-night.

With sudden gentleness he drew close to her, and laid his hand on her arm.

"Evelyn," he said very softly, "why didn't you tell me before?"

She started at his touch, as though her thoughts had for the brief moment been utterly remote, then faced round to him.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, and he took her two hands in his and held them closely, ignoring her question with another.

"Have you known it always?"

For a moment they faced one another, he with amazement and pity, she with defiance, pride, challenge even, in her look; then, with a sudden passion, she drew her hands from his, and covered her face, turning blindly away from him.

The next moment he had taken her in his arms, her beautiful head was on his shoulder, and she was sobbing as in all his life he had never heard a woman sob before.

CHAPTER XIV

IN the mud-walled club-house Mellishe and young Clifford were playing billiards, while the winter rain lashed itself against the mud walls, and the northern winter wind howled from the hills; they were playing very badly, with much wrangling and disputing, and it was evident to the veriest fool that things were going wrong—or had already done so.

Mellishe cannoned off the cushion, pocketed the red, and slapped his cue into the rack.

"Two-fifty!" he growled, and strolled into the other room, followed, after a minute or two, by the others, who told him severally and particularly what they thought of his behaviour. Scott's entrance cut short a fine bit of descriptive eloquence on Curtis's part, and they all turned to him at once. Mellishe spoke:

"How is he?" he said. "Be quick!"

Scott poured himself out a stiff peg, and drank it straight down. Then he faced them, and commanded his voice sufficiently to speak.

"Out of all danger. If any of you chaps like to see him to-morrow, you can."

Mellishe walked across to the fire, and stuffed his pipe with great care. Curtis grunted, swore, and finally blew his nose. Only Clifford spoke.

"That's a good thing. Got a sound constitution, of course." Scott growled something inarticulately into his glass, and Clifford, walking out, met Armstrong, recently the Captain in Mellishe's place, since Mellishe had got his step by reason of Willis's death, for Willis had been one of the last victims as the pestilence died down.

"I'm getting sick of Cavanagh's very name?" he remarked. "They seem to think he's Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Anyone would think he was the only invalid in Kultänn."

Armstrong laughed. He had been transferred from Lahore, and as Christmas loomed within measurable distance his change of quarters did not please him. Also, he was afflicted with a profound scorn of all authority other than military, and as he splashed his way to his quarters, Clifford by his side, he spoke sneeringly.

"Well, if they think so here they're the only people who do!" he remarked. "He seems to have been getting himself into a bally mess. I had some English papers sent me a week back, and by Gad, they don't love him at home just now."

Clifford slipped in the mud, swore, and regained his balance.

"There certainly has been a bit of a rumpus. They'll be sending up a Commissioner soon to inquire into things. Cavanagh went down at a very convenient time."

Armstrong pulled his collar higher round his ears, and bent his head to shelter himself from the biting cold of the wind and sleet.

"Of course, there'll be the devil to pay over this other business," he remarked. "That seems a worse mess than even the district. Played the fool with the beggar's wife, didn't he?"

Clifford shrugged his shoulders as well as he could for the heavy coat he wore.

"Something of the kind, I fancy. I don't know, but

Leighton struck him across the face in his own house, and called him some choice things, and next morning was found knifed. Native work, of course. But——”

“But he'd hardly be likely to do his own dirty work? Quite so. What a fool to be so clumsy over it! What's he going to do now? Clear out, I should think.”

“About the only thing left, if he's got any decency. We don't want District Officers of that type, thank you.”

Colonel Henderson, riding toward the guard-house on his big bay waler, pulled up to give a brief order to Armstrong, and broke the thread of the pleasing conversation; and in the club Mellishe and Curtis talked of Cavanagh, and Scott fidgeted about the room to such an extent that finally Mellishe looked up with a scowl.

“For Heaven's sake, Scott, get out, or sit down, or do something, and be quiet! You're enough to drive a dog mad!”

Thus abjured, Scott sat down with a thump on one of the rickety cane chairs, and proceeded to justify himself.

“Mad?” he exclaimed. “I'm not, but I think I shall be soon. Of all the blasted, damned fools of Governments——”

Mellishe swung his leg over the arm of the chair, and stared at him.

“Hold hard, Scotty! What's vexing your little soul now?”

“Vexing? Vexing?” The answer was something between a roar and a groan. “It's putting it mildly to say that! If you said breaking me up, you'd be nearer the mark!”

The explosion was so serious that both men stared at him and waited eagerly for his answer. He looked from one to the other, bit on his pipe-stem, and brought his fist down with a bang on the table.

“You ask what's the matter? Why, just that we've lost the best man we've ever had up here; just that we've had the work of years flung in our faces; just that those damned interfering muddle-headed jackasses at home don't know when they're well off? Oh, I'm coming to it—it's public property, or will be in a few hours—Cavanagh's going!”

“Going?”

Both men sprang to their feet, and Mellishe seized Scott by the shoulder and shook him.

“I thought you said he was out of danger?” he cried sharply.

Scott pulled on his pipe savagely.

"So I did!" he growled. "But he's going! What else do you expect after all that's happened? Had a letter the night he went down. Been given indefinite leave. You know what that means!"

Curtis uttered a long whistle; Mellishe dropped back in his chair, and for nearly five minutes nobody spoke. Then Curtis, standing with his back to the fire, lifted his gaze from contemplation of his boots.

"Do you mean to say he's known that all this time?" he said.

Scott glared up at him.

"Known it? Of course he's known it! Think he had the letter this morning? What's more, his successor's been appointed. Hear that? Appointed! And as soon as he's fit to travel, he'll go; and the Lord knows what sort of a fool we'll get in his place!"

Mellishe knocked his pipe out on his heel, and spoke from the bitterness of his heart.

"And that's the way the Empire rewards a man who's served it as well as he has!" he said. "When they've had to spend money and blood on patching up the work they've ruined they may begin to realize their mistake."

Scott laughed, an ugly little laugh.

"Not they! All they'll do is to pat themselves on the back, and say it shows how bad Cavanagh's influence was! It's the people's government we serve now, Mellishe, and don't you forget it! A Government like the sweet specimen sent out here a few months back! Those are the men who're in power! *People!* They're no more representative of the solid mass of the people than they are of the Emperor of China! But they bray and yelp and trick a few thousands of ignorant ne'er-do-weels, and get into Parliament, and then look round to see what harm they can do, and how they can upset the existing order of things! Talk to me about people! Talk to me about a Government! Might as well expect a snake to say it was sorry because it bit you, as a Government like our present one to admit its mistake and set about rectifying it! If we'd lived two hundred years ago it would be different. England was ruled by strong men then—men who could see further than their own noses—men who worked for one thing—the building up of a great nation and a great Empire—not for miserable party ends—men born and bred

to rule—half a dozen of 'em, not six hundred and fifty ! With the sense to know that even with half a dozen there must be a master-mind and a ruling hand. This clergy-orphan collection of oddities thinks every man's as good as his neighbour, and they'll be damned if they'll have any man over 'em as their master ! Oh, it makes me sick ! ”

There was a minute's silence as he ended, and then Mellishe spoke.

“ No one will attempt to contradict you, and the fact remains that Cavanagh's going. Oh, you're right enough ! England's asleep ! She's got a chance, but she'll chuck it away. It's damnable—it's—but nothing seems to do any good. If we had the Black Year over again we should have all the same story—the same blunders, the same hesitancy, the same disregarding of the signs of the times. We'd fight—oh yes, any fool can do that—but we'd lose our women and children, and throw away our own lives all for nothing ! We're adepts at shutting the stable-door when the steed's stolen, and we do it very loudly, and bang the bolts and turn the lock with a tremendous clatter ; and we go along to the next stable and do the same thing all over again ! ”

“ And cry out that we're hurt when we see our next-door neighbour riding the horses in question ! ” Curtis said bitterly. “ Oh, well, what's the use of talking ? I've got to meet the Ressaldar at half-past ten. Good-night, you two. Tell Cavanagh I shall be round to see him to-morrow afternoon, Scotty ! ”

With a nod he went out, and Mellishe and Scott prepared to follow his example, and in a few minutes Scott was entering the District Officer's bungalow, where for the past four weeks he had been staying. He stopped to speak to the khitmutgar, went to his quarters, and changed into dry clothes, then entered Cavanagh's room.

It was nearly two months since Richard had stood in the passage of the little hospital, and seen the lights swim and the walls sway, and he had been very ill—so ill that for days Scott did not know which way the fight would go. He was badly handicapped, too, when the crisis was past, by his patient's inertia. Richard did not care whether he lived or died. Life had ceased to hold out any particular inducement, and he was simply passive. Scott was furious and bullying by turns, and fought for his life as even he had never fought for any other ; but, dogged Scotsman though he was, he all

but owned himself beaten. Twice he said to himself that Richard could not live through the night, and twice he proved wrong, and in the morning Richard was still just alive. The long heckling persecution to which he had been subjected, culminating in that cruelly kind "indefinite leave," combined with the shock of learning Mrs. Leighton's true character, had effected what years of overwork and constant exposure had failed to do, and, the strain once relaxed, the breakdown had been complete.

An impenetrable reserve seemed to have grown up between himself and even Scott, and for long hours he would lie without speaking, hardly thinking, only dumbly, helplessly resentful and embittered.

In his inmost heart he was resentful, too, of Scott's determination not to let him die; but it was too much of an effort to put the resentment into words, and he obeyed all orders because he was too utterly exhausted to do anything else.

His resentment was as yet indefinite, a mere blind anger against life and the power that had subjected him to such treatment. By-and-by he was aware that it would narrow down and define itself, but for the present he was too tired to care.

Letters came from home. He read them listlessly and threw them aside, and then, one morning, came an official communication to the effect that his successor would enter upon his duties on Christmas Day.

But just a fortnight after, the indefinite suddenly became definite, and from a dull, hopeless indifference, Richard passed to very bitter reality of pain.

Mr. Percy Devereux, M.A., was fat and middle-aged, and given to talking much about the "future of the mystic East."

He arrived from Thāl with much luggage and a determination to win the hearts of his people by unfailing sympathy and understanding of all their needs, and smiled benevolently on the tonga-driver, and smiled on the bare hills, and smiled even when the rain began to trickle in little rivulets down his neck. When he was shown into the bungalow that was henceforth to be his home, he made a pleasant remark to the khitmutgar and waited patiently till he should be admitted to Cavanagh's room. When at last he saw him, he was sympathetic to such an extent that Richard's eyes began to glitter with something of their old fire and his foot to tap the floor impatiently.

Then, when the interview was over, Richard realized that the weeks of passive indifference were at an end, and that he was no longer quiescent, but openly, definitely rebellious against his lot.

It was the realization of Mr. Percy Devereux's utter unfitness for his work that hurt him most. He could have borne it had his successor been a strong man, with a strong man's daring and personality; but this smiling, soft-spoken product of Universities and textbooks—what chance had he in Kultänn?

The night after Mr. Devereux's arrival was a very bad one for Richard. He lay all the weary hours without sleeping, staring into the darkness and listening to the howl of the wind and the rush of the rain. And so this was the finish. All his years of unremitting toil and strenuous endeavour had led only to this end, and he was powerless to avert the trouble that lay ahead and the bloodshed that he had striven to avoid. He had struggled for years to make the best of his people, and the reward of his labour had been peace; tentative, insecure, but still considerably more lasting than aforetime; and now, in the space of a few days, the result of years would be undone, nullified, made utterly as naught, and he would see all his plans cast aside, his reforms left alone—worse still, the wholesome fear of himself and the powers behind him that he had so striven to impress, and not without success, on the wild hill-tribes beyond the Border, utterly wiped out.

His helplessness to avoid it, his utter inability to do anything but stand aside and see all his work undone, and the painful effort of years treated as non-existent, was the thing that hit him hardest. Of his own private future he thought little—that did not matter very much one way or another. It was Kultänn of which he lay thinking—Kultänn, his district, which for years had been bound up with his very inmost life, which was so innately a part of himself that he could not picture a future divorced from it. It was that, and all it meant, that tortured him as he tossed restlessly from side to side, feverish and unquiet, tormented by the pictures his imagination brought before his wearied brain.

The dawn came at last, and found him haggard and weary-eyed, so that Scott's language was strong and to the point, especially when he learnt that his patient intended leaving on the following day. He argued and cursed, but Richard was firm. —

"It's madness, man, in your state of health, with all the rivers in flood, and the road between here and Thäl one confounded swamp!" he exclaimed, after a quarter of an hour's fruitless argument. "You'll kill yourself!"

Richard was leaning back in his chair, tapping his fingers on his writing-table and looking at them idly. At the last words he lifted his head for a second and glanced at his companion.

"Well," he said quietly, "does that matter very much?"

Scott jumped to his feet, knocking over his chair.

"God help you, yes!" he cried. "Do you think I've fought for your life all these weeks for you to chuck it away now? Do you think I'm going to let you go to your death?"

Richard did not answer for a moment—Scott's outburst had left him quite unmoved—then he spoke rather indifferently.

"I don't quite see that it matters, does it? You were very good to me—I'm not ungrateful—but it was rather a waste of time."

Scott knocked his pipe out savagely.

"Good heavens, man! don't talk like a puppy who thinks the world's come to an end because he's eaten the blacking and feels ill! We all eat the blacking one way or another, and we all feel ill, but the world goes on just the same! Are you going through the rest of your life labelled as one of those interesting people—a blighted being? If so, I congratulate you!"

Richard looked at him and smiled a little, then got up, stretched his arms, smothered a yawn, and, sitting on the edge of the table, began to stuff a pipe very deliberately.

The utter indifference of his attitude incensed Scott beyond measure, even while it dismayed him. He wheeled round and came a step nearer.

"I tell you you're behaving like a fool! What's the good of your having worked like you have if you're going to chuck it and go under? What's the good of——"

Richard cut him short.

"That's precisely it!" he said, very levelly. "What is the good?"

For the moment Scott was nonplussed, then he rallied his forces.

"Everything!" he exclaimed doggedly,—"everything! You're a young man yet—not forty—and you talk like that!"

Look at what lies open to you ! Look what experience you've had ! Look at your district ! ”

“ My district ? ” Richard's voice lost its indifference with startling suddenness ; he lifted his head and looked at him. “ My district ? Mr. Devereux's, you mean ! ”

For one second there was silence ; then he threw the pipe on the table and, swinging round, faced Scott with all the nonchalance gone from his manner, and passion hard held in his voice.

“ Do you think I'd talk like this if it were my district ? ” he exclaimed fiercely. “ My God ! do you think it child's play to stand by and see your life's work undone, ruined, in a few days ? Do you think it's choice that sends me away to-morrow ? Do you think I'd go if anything I could do would save Kultānn from all that this man will let loose ? Don't you understand it's because I must ? Because I'm not man enough to stand it ? Because I can't stand by and see my work ruined ? ”

He turned away sharply to hide the tears that stung and smarted in his eyes, and for a moment Scott made no answer—there was no possible one to make ; then he kicked the leg of the table.

“ Yes,” he said curtly. “ Damn it all, man ! what do you take me for ? Of course I understand ! ”

After a minute or two Richard swung round, his face rather pale, but otherwise giving no sign of his momentary betrayal.

“ Having quite settled that matter, I'll get on with my packing, I think,” he said. “ Pass me that book just under your hand, will you ? ”

Scott passed the book, and left him a few moments later, for there was much work to do, and he saw quite clearly that nothing he could say or do would make Cavanagh alter his decision.

The Ressaldar rode in from Perānan and interviewed the new District Officer for the space of ten minutes. When the ten minutes were over he stalked out of the room, with his hawk's eyes gleaming like points of fire, his thin nostrils dilated, and his long nervous fingers fidgeting with the hilt of his sword.

Richard was writing a letter when the old man strode in, and glanced up ; then, seeing who it was, swung his chair round and pushed the paper aside.

" Good-evening, Ressaldar Sahib ! "

The two men shook hands, and the Ressaldar went at once to the point in question.

" What does the Government think of us, Cavanagh Sahib, that it sends a man like the one I have but just left ? He will not keep Kultänn safe as thou didst keep it."

Cavanagh pulled a chair up to the wood fire and sat down in another himself.

" He is the new District Officer," he said, and as he lit a cigarette he realized that it was the last time he should sit in this room talking to the Ressaldar : the last time, perhaps, that he and the old nobleman would ever meet.

The thought was insupportable. He put his foot on the match and spoke hurriedly.

" He has ruled a district before. You will find things will be well, and if the men from yonder"—he jerked his head in the direction of the hills—"raid anew, they will find out their mistake."

The Ressaldar stroked his grey beard.

" Assuredly ! " he rejoined gravely. " We have still the Colonel Sahib ! But it is the district—the canals, the villages, the schools—what of them ? You have worked and fought ; your rule has been wise, your heart understanding. What are thy children to do without thee ? Their feet will lead them astray, and their hearts will whisper of foolish things. They who have but seen thy face from afar have learnt to look to thee for help ; they have cried, and thou hast answered ; they have sinned, and thou hast punished with a strong arm and hast forgiven ! Without thee they are lost, helpless, evil, as children who are but newly born, without wisdom or strength ! And if those, born of the earth and the hovels, weep and are afraid because of thy departure, how much more shall I beat my head upon the stones—I, who have tended thee in sickness and ridden side by side with thee in health ! I, who have learnt of thy heart, to whom thou hast talked, who has given me the joys whereon I thought never to look again ! Thou who hast blotted out from me the worst depth of my sorrow, thou who hast been to me brother of my craft, son of my heart ! My beard grows white, my eyes dim ! *Hai mai !* what am I to do without thee ? "

Till this moment Richard had faced the morrow more or less calmly, with a sort of desperate courage, but the

Ressaldar's words were heart-breaking, and for a moment he had to fight hard to retain his self-control.

The old man leant across and laid his hand on Richard's shoulder.

"*Hai mai!* the time has come!" he said very softly. "We stand at the parting of two lives that have been one . . . and the pain of parting is keener than the pain of death! Thou hast been as the very light of my eyes, my son, and it comes to me that thou hast loved me well—not as I love thee, for thou art still young, and thou wilt love again, while I am old, and have naught left to give my heart to but thou, yet well and truly, with a great heart and a great courage. Nay, grieve not. I am old. . . . I am not worth such sorrow. . . . Thou wilt not forget me, son of my heart?"

Richard raised his head and looked into his eyes.

"Never, my father!" he said.

For a long moment there was silence, then the old Sikh lifted his hands and blessed him, and embraced him, and then pushed forward the hilt of his sword, and Richard touched it.

A knock came at the door, and the Colonel's voice sounded without.

"Are you there, Cavanagh?"

Richard started.

"Yes, Colonel. Do you mind waiting a moment?" he answered; and as the sound of the Colonel going into the adjoining room came to their ears he turned again to the Sikh and took his signet-ring from his finger.

"Will you wear this, my father?" he said hoarsely. "I have worn it many years. It has the arms of my blood upon it, and till death comes to you let it speak of me. . . . It is but a poor gift to you, but if I could place the wealth of the world at your feet it would not tell one-half that is in my heart or the love I bear for you and shall bear."

He put the ring on the slender brown finger, and they clasped hands and stood for a long moment gazing into one another's face, each wishful to impress on the memory the last look of the well-loved features. Then the Ressaldar drew himself up and walked to the door, and without a word Richard went with him to the verandah and watched him spring to the saddle and ride away through the rain; and when the sight of him was quite blotted out by the mist, Richard

turned back into the house, conscious suddenly that he was utterly tired out.

The Colonel had come up for a last chat, and, despite his weariness, Richard accompanied him down to the club, and as the evening wore on one man after another drifted up, for it had come to everyone's knowledge that he was leaving the following morning, and they had ridden to the club to have a last evening with him.

About twelve o'clock Scott, who had to be at Parachinwar early the following morning, said good-night, and Richard accompanied him across the compound and stood a moment at the gateway bidding him farewell.

The rain had cleared off for a few moments, and the moon rode high in the heavens, flooding the wet ground and dripping pine-trees behind the club with a cold wintry light.

"I shall just get back before it starts to rain again," Scott said, surveying the cold northern sky. "By Jove! it's rather fine, isn't it? Look where the moonlight catches the snow on the Hills!"

Richard nodded, and for a moment neither of them spoke again, for Scott, like all men of his type, strongly resented any emotion threatening to master him, and Richard was gazing at the scene around him, trying to imprint every line, every light and shadow, on his memory. The bazaar lay away to the left in the hollow, and beyond it the swollen Kultanar raced and roared, the moonlight glinting on its foam-flecked surface. Straight ahead the ground lay bare and open towards Thäl, and to the left, miles away, above the slopes of the lower hills, the vast snowy rampart of the Hindu Kush towered white and glittering in the moonlight against the cold velvet darkness of the winter sky, a wall of impregnable height and awful grandeur, stretching as far as the eye could reach.

Richard turned his back on the club-house, and stood gazing at the Hills, with a look on his face that made even Scott not dare to interrupt his thoughts, for in his heart was an overwhelming agony, a rending apart, as it were, of his very soul and spirit, and he knew how in the days to come he would hunger for a sight of those silent Hills—hunger, and hunger in vain.

The piercing cold at last gave Scott his excuse for speech.

"Look here, you'll get a chill, and so shall I," he said

roughly. "Get back indoors. Good luck, old chap! I shall look you up when I come home."

He held out his hand, and Richard wrung it hard.

"Yes, do," he said. "My brother's address will always find me. The Colonel's got it."

Scott nodded and plunged his hands in his pockets.

"Well, I must be off. Good-bye—— What the devil——"

Something screamed past Richard's head, so close that it grazed his ear, and buried itself with a thud in the bark of a tree, and a rifle-shot rang out, echoing and re-echoing in the silence.

For a moment the two men stared at one another, for the intent was obviously murder; then Richard wiped the blood from his ear and laughed rather grimly.

"Narrow shave, that! Somebody loves me so much that they can't suffer me even to clear out alive!"

But Scott did not wait to answer, and before Richard had finished speaking he was at the club-house door explaining matters to Colonel Henderson.

For a moment Richard did not move, caring very little if a second shot followed the first; then the habit of years asserted itself, and he went towards the club, meeting the other men coming out, and in a very short while a detachment of troops was after the would-be assassin.

The memory of a hot afternoon more than three years before was very present with him as he made his way to his bungalow, escorted by all the men off duty, swearing vengeance on the unknown enemy, and when, after two o'clock, he was finally left alone he wondered if those attempts on his life were all made by the same man. This, to-night, made the third, the first being on the night of that day on which he had heard of his leave. That, first, was without doubt merely the result of a private grudge; but the second, on the night of the big floods, was a very different matter. Norman Leighton's hatred seemed more powerful in death than in life.

During the hours of darkness that followed, Richard considered matters and came to a decision. The thought of England was abhorrent to him; the realization of all it would mean made him shudder. He would not go back. His life, such as it was, was his own. He had no one to consider, no one dependent on him. He would take what risks he chose, and he made up his mind then and there to take them, to go North instead of South, and cross the Border.

It would be easy to get a couple of men, and for the rest he would trust to Fate. No one must know, that was all. Not even to the Ressaldar would he confide his plans.

He slept uneasily for an hour or two just before dawn, and woke early, for there was much to be done.

Mr. Percy Devereux was formally coming into residence on the following day, so he was spared the humiliation of beholding the smiling product of textbooks begin to make mistakes ; and at ten o'clock the tonga stood ready to take him to Thāl, and the driving rain beat down upon the Colonel, Mellishe, Curtis, and half a dozen others, who waited in the compound, ready to accompany him for the first five miles of the way.

Despite the rain and bitter cold, the entire native town seemed to have turned out to bid him farewell, and the tonga passed between two lines of wailing people, whose lamentations filled the air, accompanied by the little escort of mounted men, the Colonel riding abreast the cart, his face very grim and set, for his heart was heavy within him. Only the Ressaldar and Scott were absent—Scott through work, the Ressaldar because he could not bear that any eye but Richard Cavanagh's should behold his grief.

At the dak-bungalow, fifteen miles from Thāl, the little cavalcade halted, and the Colonel moved his horse close to the cart's side.

"Good-bye, Cavanagh," he said harshly. "This is the worst day's work I've ever known, and we shall pay dearly for it."

"We may have you back yet, if Mr. Devereux plays the fool as thoroughly as I imagine he will do," Mellishe said. "Good luck, Cavanagh. We shall hear big things of you some day, I know !"

The drifting rain blotted all distant things from view ; the wind was cruelly cold, the whole scene one of unutterable desolation, yet, as Mellishe spoke, Richard threw up his head with renewed stirring of hope and vigour. He looked straight into Mellishe's face, and a light came to his eyes that had long been absent.

"By God, you shall !" he said, and clasped hands in silence.

The Colonel's eyes gleamed under their heavy brows. Cavanagh was not a man who took such an oath lightly, and the resolution that thrilled through those four words had been good to hear. He thought of them as he rode back to

Kultänn at the head of his forlorn little column, and of Cavanagh, driving alone into the rain and the mist, with that oath, newly taken, upon his soul.

CHAPTER XV

SIR GEORGE DUNCOMBE dismissed his cab at Hyde Park Corner, and proceeded to walk eastwards along Piccadilly, complacently regarding the passers-by and thoroughly enjoying the beautiful spring day. That very afternoon Cecile had gone down to Yelverton, preparatory to the arrival of a house-party for Easter, having declared that she must superintend personally the arrangements that were being made, so Sir George was for the nonce a bachelor, and had twenty-four hours absolutely to himself, with the single exception of an appointment at his club for six o'clock.

He was very well pleased with life in general this glorious March afternoon, and, acting on a sudden impulse, decided to dine with Gifford and go on to a theatre; so he turned into a call-office, telephoned to Harley Street, and then to a theatre, and, having made satisfactory arrangements, continued his walk.

"INDIAN POLITICAL SCANDAL.

AMAZING DEVELOPMENTS OF THE KULTÄNN TRAGEDY.

EXPOSURE OF WELL-KNOWN OFFICIAL'S METHODS."

The placard, borne by an old newsvendor, stared him in the face, and jerked him violently out of his self-satisfaction. Above the headline ran the name of the *Daily Planet*, a disreputable rag of the most pronouncedly disloyal views; but the name of Kultänn was sufficient to make Sir George care very little for that, and, pink paper in hand, he hurried across the road into the Green Park and commenced to skim through the article thus billed.

"Some amazing facts have lately come to light in connection with the death of the lately deceased and much respected Member for Ledbury. We refer, of course, to Mr. Norman Leighton, whose lamented death was reported

in these columns as having occurred at some obscure hill-station in India some eight or nine months ago."

Sir George left off skimming, and began to read in earnest, and for fully five minutes he stood motionless in the middle of the path, with frowning brows and close-set mouth. At the end of that time he folded the paper very carefully, his face unusually grim, and, turning back, entered Piccadilly and took a hansom to Fleet Street.

He alighted at the entrance to a small court, and, telling the man to wait, went up to an office bearing the words "*Daily Planet*" on the door, only to find it closed and the staff obviously away till the evening, which was, perhaps, considering all things, just as well. He was obliged to keep his appointment at the club, but seven o'clock found him at Harley Street, the paper in his hand, and Gifford found him raging in his den when he came down five minutes later.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, old man," he began. "But I was—— Why, what's up?"

Sir George struck his clenched fist on the mantelpiece.

"Listen to this!" he exclaimed. "Just listen! Yes, I know dinner's ready, and I don't care! Listen, I tell you!"

Gifford subsided without even an expostulation, for he saw his friend was desperately in earnest, and Sir George, his fingers tapping nervously on the mantelpiece, began to speak.

"It's the leader in that vile rag, the *Daily Planet*—you can read it for yourself later on—attacking Cavanagh. Some hanger-on of Leighton's has evidently written it. Listen!

"It appears that the unfortunate gentleman'—that's Leighton!—'was the victim of a deliberately planned and most cold-blooded murder, and it will be remembered that, prior to his departure for the East, Mr. Leighton called the attention of the House to the gross mismanagement of the district of Kultänn in North-West India, the District Officer of which is a person named Cavanagh.'"

"Good heavens, George!" Gifford exclaimed. "What the devil are they driving at?"

Sir George laughed shortly.

"You'll soon see!" he returned. "Wait a bit. There's lots more in the same strain, and then comes the important part. 'On his arrival at Kultänn, there was a scene between Mr. Leighton and Cavanagh, from which it appears that the dead man had been cruelly wronged.' Hold hard, Gifford—

wait! 'To judge from Mr. Leighton's justifiable reproaches, it appears that Cavanagh had been guilty of the worst form of treachery, while staying in his house, and, on the injured husband's discovery of the intrigue, had been guilty of the additional insult of personal violence.' "

Gifford sprang to his feet with an oath.

"It's unspeakable! unthinkable!" he cried. "Good God, Cavanagh! who's the editor of this filth? I'll horse-whip him in his own office! I'll cut him into ribbons!"

Sir George shrugged his shoulders.

"Just what I said a little while ago. Wait a bit, though!"

He glanced at Gifford, who subsided for the moment, and went on.

"There's a good deal more of the same sort. You can read it for yourself, but I'll read the last part to you: 'Following this scene at the club came the news of Mr. Leighton's murder, and at the Foreign Office this morning we were given to understand that there had been an inquiry made into the matter, and a verdict of wilful murder returned against the person or persons unknown. We are tempted to wonder how far the word "unknown" is justified, and we are of the opinion that a searching and public inquiry should be demanded into the administration of justice—so called—in India. We have long thought that far too much power has been placed in the hands of District Officers, and this sad event only serves to justify our opinions. Cavanagh, we understand, has been granted indefinite leave of absence.' "

As he finished reading there was a moment's absolute silence; then Gifford spoke half under his breath.

"What's it mean? George, what's it mean? I don't understand!"

Duncombe folded the paper very accurately.

"I don't know," he said, rather hoarsely. "Dick seems to have got himself into a mess of some sort, but I won't believe a word against him."

Gifford rose and began walking restlessly up and down the room, and at the other's words he frowned.

"Of course not. But I can't understand a word of it. It's the first I've heard of such a thing, and for this diabolical rag to have got hold of it, is damnable! Let me look at it!"

He snatched up the paper and paused a moment to re-read a few lines, then stared at Duncombe with an expression of almost comical dismay on his face.

"Indefinite leave!" he said. "Good heavens! Even this penny-a-liner daren't publish that if it weren't true! Indefinite leave! . . . Richard! . . ."

"It's eight months since I heard from him," Duncombe said, rather grimly. "More—nearly ten months! I had a pencil scrawl just as he was getting about again after cholera last October. To-day's the 20th of April. If he's been kicked out, it's been done very quietly, that's all I can say. I've written twice, but not had a word in answer. We never wrote regularly, but I've never been quite so long without hearing from him."

"I know. And I'm in the same boat. But if he isn't in Kultänn, where the devil is he?"

Duncombe lit a cigarette and threw the match carefully into the fireplace.

"Anywhere on the face of the earth," he said. "If it's true, I'd give a good deal to find out."

"I'd give more to have him within reach!" Gifford retorted. "I tell you this sort of thing's enough to play the devil with a man, especially with one like Dick. All his hope, all his ambition, is wrapped up in his work, and if that's taken away, God help him!"

Duncombe threw away the half-smoked cigarette and stared into the fire.

"Poor old chap!" he said, half to himself,—“poor old chap! It will break his heart. It's appalling, horrible!"

As both Sir George and Gifford expected, the morning papers universally commented on the extraordinary leader of the *Daily Planet*. The *Times* and the *Morning Post* were guarded in the extreme; the earliest edition of the *Westminster Gazette* expressed dislike of such violent and personal language; but none disproved the statement that Cavanagh had been given indefinite leave; and the half-penny Press, while openly condemning the spirit in which the leader had been written and the paper in which it had appeared; was forced to admit that Richard Cavanagh was no longer at Kultänn, and that his departure had been kept quiet. Indeed, within twenty-four hours the matter was the principal topic of conversation over half the country, for during his leave Richard Cavanagh had been one of the foremost men in the public eye, and an extraordinary interest had been aroused both by his personality and his brilliant record, and the great and marked honours which royalty had bestowed upon him

was enough to make him one of the most talked about men in England.

Consequently, the amazing information concerning him that had suddenly reached the public ear aroused an interest almost unprecedented, and the desire for further details rose to a terrific pitch; while from every quarter a storm of comment, obloquy, condemnation, criticism, kindly or the reverse, according to the nature of the speaker, was showered upon his name.

In the very middle of all the excitement and gossip Richard came back to England, landing three days after the *Daily Planet* leader had appeared.

No one knew of his coming—not even his brother—and, after giving directions for his luggage to be sent to a quiet little hotel just off St. James's Street, he took a hansom and told the man to drive to Piccadilly through the busiest streets, by way of Ludgate Hill, Fleet Street, and the Strand.

It was a bright afternoon, and the streets were crowded, the pavements thronged, and Richard leant back, smoking a cigarette, and watching the traffic with the keen delight that only a man returned from far countries can feel.

For the time being he had forgotten the reason that had brought him there, and remembered only that he was home again—back in the midst of civilization, back in London. The noise, the jam of traffic, the jar of a locking wheel, as his hansom endeavoured to squeeze through too small a space, even the raucous shouts of the drivers or newsboys, all filled him with delight, and he would have been content for the drive to have been twice as long.

His delight was destined to be short-lived. Half way up Fleet Street his hansom was stopped by a block in the traffic, and a newsboy, alert for possible business, darted under a horse's nose and waved a paper in Richard's face.

"Paper, sir—paper? *Dily Mile, Standerd, Westminster G'zette, Globe!* Here y'are, sir! Thank you, sir!"

Richard took a *Globe*, and the boy jumped back, displaying his placard of startling headlines: "Latest news of the Leighton tragedy! Official statement from Kultänn."

He opened the *Globe*, checked an exclamation, and began to read. For a minute or two the busy scene around him went all unheeded, and the pleasure faded out of his eyes.

When he had read the paragraph, he looked up, the old stern expression back to his face, the close set to the lips

and jaw, and his eyes looked out unseeingly on the bustle of the sunny streets. It seemed that he was behind the times, that certain news had got ahead of him, and for the moment a bitter little smile curved his lips.

"Here y'are, sir! Sed the St. George's didn't you?"

The cabby's voice, speaking through the little trap in the roof, roused him from his very unprofitable thoughts, and brought him back to the realization of his surroundings. He had telegraphed for his rooms, and, after dinner that evening, went out again. It was still early, and he had a long and empty evening to fill, and as he stood on the steps of the hotel he wondered what in the world he could find to do. There were the theatres. He was not in the mood for theatres to-night. Concerts. Could he pay attention even to music, which he loved? His eye ran down the list of amusements, then, lighting on the advertisements of Queen's Hall, saw that Dr. Richter was conducting a Wagner programme. The memory of the last time he had seen the "Ring" was beautiful still, so he telephoned for a seat, and then, with an hour still on his hands, sauntered out and began to make his way towards Piccadilly Circus. He walked slowly, for, he had nothing to do and nowhere to go, and it came to him very forcibly that in the future this state would be familiar enough. His work was over.

The contrast, too, between this return as it was and the return to which he had looked forward was very bitter—so bitter that he felt he could not face anyone he knew for a day or two. He must read up all the papers had had to say about him, must put himself once more in touch with civilization, and must be sure of his own position before he even allowed his brother to know of his return.

Crossing Piccadilly Circus, he was hindered by traffic, and as he waited on an island the Duncombes' brougham drove by. He caught a glimpse of Cecile's pretty animated face and a sheen of delicate draperies, but she did not see him, and a stranger to Richard was with her. He drew back and pulled his hat well over his eyes, not wishing to be recognised by anyone as he walked on up Regent Street, but the sight of her face made him realize how he had missed his friends, how he longed to meet them again.

He had taken care that his seat was well at the back of the hall, and as he only went in just before the music began, no one saw him. The programme was a fine one, played as

only the London Symphony Orchestra could play it, and for two hours Richard forgot everything but the incomparable music.

After a while he looked at his programme, and saw that the last item was the overture to "Die Meistersinger."

He saw the orchestra lift their instruments, saw the indescribable little thrill of satisfaction run through the audience, and settled himself for twelve minutes' pure enjoyment.

The Doctor looked over the huge waiting orchestra, picking them up with a glance like the flash of blue steel, stood for one second with his baton lifted, his left arm half raised, as the audience waited breathlessly; then came the satisfied nod of the grand old head, the clean crisp downbeat, and the gorgeous crashing chord of the most joyous music ever written.

It was about half-past ten when Richard left Queen's Hall with the glamour of the music still in his ears, with a strange riot of emotion in his blood—a riot that made his eyes bright, his pulse quick, his breath short, for pure happiness in all those wonderful sounds he had but lately heard. He walked swiftly, enjoying the cool clean air, still hearing the last extraordinary triumph of the closing chords of the "Meistersinger" overture, still seeing the wonderful hands of the man who had held the vast orchestra, the wonderful music, in his grip—the man who stood there, quiet in the very greatness of his strength and his genius, giving to the world the very triumph of sound.

He walked westward, not noticing very particularly where he was going, till he found himself at the top of North Audley Street; and then, pausing abruptly, the glamour left him, and he realized that he was very tired and sick at heart, and longing to see one face he knew and hear one welcoming voice. He turned down Audley Street, striking eastwards across Grosvenor Square, and so came to Berkeley Square and the sight of his brother's house.

Then he pulled up and stood a minute or two gazing at the windows. Both Hilda and Frank were in town, for the house was unshuttered and lights showed in several windows, and the window-boxes were full of pale spring flowers. The temptation to go to the house was almost irresistible, the desire to see Frank almost overwhelming; but the knowledge of Lady Hilda's uncompromising code of honour held him back, and his iron will fought down the rising temptation. He fancied that he could almost hear his sister-in-law's scathing

condemnation of himself and all his works, for assuredly he had fulfilled all and more than she had ever prophesied for him, and come to grief more thoroughly than even she had feared.

No. Hilda would be the first to condemn him.

He turned sharply and, traversing the Square, went on down Berkeley Street into Piccadilly to his hotel.

The smoking-room was empty, and he threw himself into a chair near the fire, for sleep was absolutely out of the question, and he did not want to think. He took up an illustrated weekly, and began to read, and a little later two men strolled into the room and began to talk.

Richard read on till the sound of his own name roused him, and he lifted his head a trifle, his fingers tightening on the paper.

"Bad business, this affair at Kultänn, isn't it?" one said to the other. "Shouldn't care to be in Cavanagh's shoes just now, should you?"

The other man tasted his whisky-and-soda critically.

"No, not much. Poor devil, though, I'm sorry for him! There's a regular hornet's nest about his ears."

His companion lit a cigar and snorted.

"I must say I don't agree with you. The man seems to me to be a thorough-paced scoundrel. Look at the way he's been administering his district. Seems to have messed things up pretty thoroughly if you ask me. Look at the question Cunningham raised the other day about the expenditure. I believe it's been outrageous."

Richard did not wait to hear the reply, but put his paper aside and walked out of the room, realizing a little more plainly how he was regarded in England, and with what opinions his work was viewed.

He realized still more on the evening of the next day, for he had read all the papers had had to say of him, and found out many particulars of the organized scheme of spite that had been working against him.

His plans were as yet quite unsettled. He had not the least idea what he should do, for he was not even sure whether he should stay in England. The country was approaching the chaos of a General Election, and as the intrigue against him had been organized by the extreme Democrats, there was some hope that matters might be better should a change of Government occur.

Even in his present state of mind, sore and bitter though it was, he could not contemplate doing nothing for the rest of his life, and half a dozen ideas as to his future chased one another through his brain, none of them ordered or even formulated, yet serving to distract his attention a little from his present position.

He had for the present found out all he needed, and such being the case, the desire to see some friends asserted itself imperatively, and he took a cab and drove to South Audley Street.

He was shown into Sir George's study. Her ladyship had a dinner-party, but dinner was just over, and if he would wait a moment Sir George should be told.

"Very well," Richard said curtly, and the man withdrew.

The room was warm and pleasant—thick curtains drawn to keep out the draught, a cheery fire burning, and everywhere the evidence of luxury in a very charming form.

Richard strolled over to the fire, and stood idly examining the china on the mantelpiece and the pipes in a rack close by. His frame of mind was not very enviable, for he had steeled himself into a greater Stoicism than he really felt, and like all reserved natures, the only outward sign he gave was an added curtness of manner.

It was not very probable that either George or Cecile would care to continue their friendship with a disgraced man. They would be quite glad to see him—neither of them would ever fail in courtesy—but deep down in their hearts they would wish he had never returned . . . and he would know it, however much they tried to hide it even from themselves.

He picked up a pocket edition of Swinburne, and stood examining it for a moment ; then, as the door-handle moved, laid it down and turned round, his brow black, his eyes cold and hard, a curious aloofness in his manner.

The door opened and closed violently, and Duncombe took three strides across the room and caught both his hands in a grip that made the nerves tingle.

"Dickie, Dickie ! My dear old chap, this is good ! I am glad to see you again ! But where the devil have you sprung from ? "

Richard's face relaxed a little, but he did not respond to the greeting ; instead, he freed his hands quietly from his friend's clasp, and looked into his face with profoundly desolate eyes.

"Why, just where he did spring from!" he said tonelessly. "'From going to and fro upon the earth, and walking up and down it,' and, like His Eminence, I seem to have returned to a merry little hell of my own making."

The smile left George's ruddy face, and was replaced by a look of sudden anxiety. He did not reply for a moment, but pulled up a chair for Richard and handed him his cigarette-case. When they were both smoking he spoke.

"What do you mean?" he said. "And why haven't you answered my letters? And why haven't you——"

Richard held up his hand.

"Don't bombard me with questions too much," he said. "I shall have quite enough cross-examination later on."

George blew out a cloud of smoke, and, turning, looked at him keenly as he leant back, gazing in the fire.

The crisp brown hair was grey on the temples; the lines about the mouth and eyes deeper and more numerous; and the whole face was harder and sterner than before—the face of a man who had fought long and hard, and suffered very bitterly, and George was inexpressibly shocked at the change.

A knock at the door made Richard raise his head sharply, and the next instant Gifford entered the room, shut the door with a bang, and came across to Richard with out-stretched hand.

"Dear old man, how are you?" he said, and Richard rose and shook hands.

"All right, thanks. I didn't hope to see you."

"When I heard who it was, my good manners fled, and I left my hostess and everyone else," Gifford retorted. "It is first-rate to see you again, Richard!"

"It is equally good to hear you say so," Richard replied, and something in the formal words aroused Gifford's surprise.

He lit a cigarette and sat down, casting a quick glance of inquiry at Sir George as Richard spoke.

"Well," he said, "what have you to say about it all?"

The bitterness in his eyes and tone did not escape George's notice, and he answered his question in a way characteristic of his kindly heart, and, leaning a little forward, laid his hand for a second on his friend's knee.

"What's up, old man?" he said gently. "We've been friends a good many years, you know; don't start shutting me out now!"

Richard's expression did not change. He knocked the ash off his cigarette into the hearth and spoke curtly.

"How much do you know?"

George drew back, his anxiety deepening. He was too sensible to be hurt by the repulse, for he saw that matters were even more serious than he had supposed. Richard had suffered very grievously, and his suffering had hardened him. He must be allowed to tell what he wished in his own way. He took his cue from the other, and spoke in his ordinary manner.

"I know Leighton's dead; and all we heard till the other day was that he had died in India, presumably while hunting. It was supposed that it was fever, or something of that sort."

"I see. Well, now you know more, for you have read the papers. Private revenge, not hunting, took Leighton to India. He followed me to Kultänn, came to the club, and insulted me, and finally—in my own house and in front of my native servants—struck me across the face with a riding-whip."

Both Gifford and Duncombe uttered an exclamation, but Richard went on, his voice level and cold, as though recounting some happening that had no personal interest.

"The next morning, early, he was found with a knife in the lung. There was an inquiry, of course. It was clearly native work, and the matter was not made public, for obvious reasons. Immediately after that came the cholera—within a week or two, that is—and just before I went down I received an official intimation to the effect that I was granted indefinite leave of absence."

Duncombe dropped his cigarette and stared.

"But why?" he said; "Good Lord! why?"

Richard lifted his eyebrows, then uttered a bitter little laugh.

"You are more generous in your judgment than the world's likely to be or my superiors were!" he said. "We had just had a violent quarrel, and the murdered man had struck me."

"But they surely don't think——"

Duncombe hesitated, and for the first time Richard's icy restraint gave way a little.

"You don't know your fellow-men very well," he said bitterly. "Of course they thought it! And, God knows, I'd had provocation! All my years of hard work undone, all my plans knocked on the head, and by that man's private

hatred ! Oh, he'd reason to hate me, I grant him that, and I'd been fooled ; but I'd have given him any satisfaction he wanted, but he preferred to wreck my work and jeopardize thousands of lives instead ! ”

Sir George's face grew very grave.

“ Surely the work you've done might have stood you in good stead with your department ? ” he said.

Richard threw the end of his cigarette into the fire and leant forward, his elbows on his knees, his fingers interlocked.

Gifford, sitting rather back in the shadow, watched him intently.

“ They're right in what they've done, this far,” he said. “ We can't afford to stand anything but high in the sight of those people, and I'd come to grief—through my own fault, I grant you. I'd been struck in front of my native servants. A ruler can't afford that sort of thing.”

He paused a moment, and a sudden quiver passed over his face. He rose, and pushing back his chair, began to walk up and down the room, for he felt his composure beginning to give way.

“ And so here I am, sent home ! A man whose Government has no further use for him ! The authorities didn't want the matter made public ; I suppose they wanted to spare me. To spare me ! I think the powers that be were a little afraid of the exaggerated opinion the Hillmen have of me, so, to all intents and purposes, I've been smuggled out of the country, kicked out of the back-door, to save a scandal ! And now some kind friend seems determined that the matter shall not be hushed up, and that I shall go through with it ! Very well, I will ! ”

Sir George watched him under down-bent brows, but he did not speak, for he knew there was more to hear.

For a moment Richard halted in his fierce stride, and looked from one to the other.

“ Haven't you anything to say ? ” he demanded. “ Everyone else has plenty ! ”

Sir George spoke for them both, passing over the taunt as unworthy of a reply, for he knew how pain can drive a man desperate.

“ Not at present,” he said quietly, “ unless it is to ask what reason there was for Leighton's hatred of you.”

Richard laughed scornfully.

"My own carelessness. I was fool enough not to see the unscrupulous wickedness of a woman!"

"Mrs. Leighton?"

"Yes. Later on I had the consolation of knowing I wasn't the first, or the second. I thought her a deeply injured and helpless woman! It's true the devil looks after his own! I tried to help her——"

For a moment Sir George's discretion gave way.

"Richard, you idiot!" he said emphatically.

Richard swung on his heel and struck his fist on the mantel-piece.

"Do you suppose I don't know that?" he said savagely. "She played her little game skilfully, and I was caught! Leighton came in and found me there one evening, and made some beastly remarks, and I knocked him down. He didn't take it well, and reminded me that I'd informed him myself where he could best attack me. He did it, and then he came to India, and the rest you know. There was one long series of complaints, demands for explanation of the simplest administrative action, criticisms, every form of grit in the cog-wheels that you can imagine. . . . I've been a fool, a damned fool! . . . Now you know everything I can tell you!"

His voice broke; he ceased speaking abruptly, and, dropping into his chair, covered his face with his hands. He was trembling with rage and pain, and he knew that if he did not hang on to himself with all his strength he would break down altogether and sob his heart out.

Gifford's lips tightened, and he sat rather rigidly still. He knew at what a crisis of emotion Richard was, and knew, too, that a break-down must come. Indeed, it was far better that it should, but not here and now, nor in a way that would fill him afterwards with self-scorn and humiliation.

Sir George, also, did not speak, but because he could not quite trust his voice, and after a few minutes Richard raised his head.

"I've kept you from your guests," he said, rather hoarsely. "I am sorry. You should have told me."

Sir George got up and selected a pipe with great care, then, crossing the hearth to get the match, he laid his hand on Richard's shoulder.

"You might have let us know where you were," he said gently. "You know we'd have seen you through, no matter what was wrong."

Richard glanced up at him and smiled for the first time that evening. He reached up and laid his hand over Sir George's where it rested on his shoulder.

"I know, dear old chap—I know!" he said, and then, getting up, looked at his watch.

"I must be off!" he said. "I'd no idea I'd kept you so long; and, Georgie, you must go back to your neglected guests."

Sir George was immensely relieved at his tone, and he nodded acquiescence.

"I shall have to go, but you needn't. Stay and talk to Gifford. And lunch here to-morrow. Yes, you must. Cecile will never forgive me otherwise, if I let you go without having seen her. Half-past one. Come early. Good-night, old man; it's splendid to have you back!"

He hurried out without waiting for a reply, and Richard bit his lip and turned back to his chair. Gifford, however, did not give him time to speak, but lit another cigarette and began to ask questions.

"By the way, there were one or two interesting things about that epidemic of yours," he said. "I've been doing a little bacteriology just lately. Taken it up as a hobby, you know. You shall tell me about them, if you will. Had a bad turn yourself, didn't you? You're looking pulled down. What have you been doing with yourself since you left Kultänn?"

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I'm all right!" he said. "Bound to leave me a bit tired, that's all. What have I been doing? Well, just wandering about. I crossed the Border, and got into Afghanistan, and came home overland."

"From Afghanistan? *Overland*?" Gifford asked, rather incredulously.

"Yes. I stayed there for a month or two—there and round about. Then I came through to Constantinople, and so straight on to Paris. I stayed a day in Paris, and here I am."

Gifford looked at him curiously.

"It can't have taken you more than a week, even from Constantinople," he said. "Were you seven months in the back of beyond?"

"About that."

"I wonder you weren't killed!"

"Oh, I got through all right, as you see. What was it

you wanted to know about the cholera? I'll tell you all I can."

Gifford took the hint, and asked no further questions about his wanderings, and plunged into a purely professional conversation anent cholera epidemics and bacteriology generally; but when, at twelve o'clock, Richard got up to go, Gifford crossed the room swiftly, and pulling down the lower lid, looked critically into his eye, then took hold of his wrist.

Richard lifted his brows with a smile.

"What's up?" he said. "Something that doesn't please you?"

"No; not at present," was the non-committal reply. "But there soon will be if you're not careful. Take my advice, there's a good chap, and lie low for a week or two.

You're pretty well played out, and you want a thorough rest."

Gifford paused a moment, looking at him.

"Leave your affairs to George and me for a bit," he added, and there was a new significance in his tone. "You've had a little too much to do lately, and it's not been good for you. Now it's our turn, and I assure you I for one shan't waste my opportunity. Put Governments and administration and scandals, and above all editors of papers, out of your head for a little, and go down into the country and pick flowers. See? Go to Pangley."

"Pangley?"

Richard echoed the name in amazement, and Gifford nodded.

"Yes. I'll write to Evelyn myself to-night. It'll be the best place for you just now, and you'll be thoroughly quiet. You're not ill at present, but I tell you frankly you soon will be if you go on like this. Do as I tell you, and go as soon as you can."

"I can't go for a day or two," he said. "I haven't seen my brother yet. It's very good of you. But—what will Miss Chetwynde say? It is rather making use of her, isn't it?"

"Evelyn will be delighted, and she'll make you do as I tell you, which is an important thing just now. As for making use of her, that's rubbish. She's been wondering where in the world you'd got to, like the rest of us."

A slight constraint entered Richard's manner. He knew he had wronged his friends in thought, and Evelyn also, but he felt absolutely incapable of trusting even her just at

present—the memory of that other woman who had so betrayed him was too painfully clear. He did not want to meet even Evelyn, yet it was impossible to refuse Gifford's invitation, and the thought of Pangle, quiet and sunny amidst the meadows, was very welcome. He gave his word to go, even though he resented the fact that he must meet Evelyn, and left the house after a solemn promise that he would lunch there on the following day.

Gifford was the last guest to leave, and as he stood at the top of the staircase, bidding Sir George and Lady Duncombe good-bye, he gave vent to one comment, and one only, on the story he had heard.

"There are two people in this world whom I should like delivered into my hands!" he said, with an odd little smile. "One is Mrs. Leighton—I beg her pardon, Princess Liadov; the other is the editor of the *Planet*. I feel I could exercise my craft on both, . . . and it is a pity the devil should have to wait for his own!"

The next morning Richard went to Berkeley Square and learnt that his brother was out of town till the following day, but that Lady Hilda was at home and expecting to see him. He had written briefly to Frank the night before, saying he was in town, so, evidently, his sister-in-law had been told of his arrival, and, with no very pleasant anticipations, Richard followed the footman upstairs. The drawing-room was empty, and full of spring sunshine, and as he waited he was vividly reminded of just such another day three years ago when he had waited here. The skies were clear and rain-washed, the March wind roaring, the flower-beds in the Square filled with daffodils and stiff little crocuses, and the scent of spring was abroad in the air. All was exactly the same, even to the great bowls of daffodils and narcissus in the room, yet what a different home-coming that had been! He turned sharply as the door opened and his sister-in-law came in, his head up, his shoulders thrown back, his face set; and Lady Hilda paused a moment as she saw him, shocked, as Sir George had been, at the change in him—the grey hair on the temples, the lines round the mouth and eyes that told of the suffering his iron will had sternly repressed, at the indescribable ageing and embittering visible in his face. He did not move, and she came swiftly across the room, her hand outstretched.

"I am very pleased to see you, Richard," she said—"very pleased indeed. How are you, my dear?"

She took his hand in hers, looked into his eyes, and then did a thing she had never done before—she leant forward and kissed him.

For a moment he did not move or answer. It seemed that again he had been guilty of misjudgment, and the caress, coming as it did from his sister-in-law, the first person, so he had thought, who would condemn him, amazed and touched him.

As though unaware of his surprise, she moved to the fire and sat down near it.

"I am so sorry you have just missed Frank!" she said, speaking as though his arrival was the most opportune possible. "He left early this morning, and is not coming back till to-morrow. Won't you come nearer the fire, Richard? It is so cold to-day."

He crossed the room and sat down.

"Is Betty at home?" he asked, and Lady Hilda nodded.

"No. She is staying in Devonshire for a week. She is just engaged to be married—to a man whose brother I believe you know—Cyril Mellishe."

For a moment Richard's face lit up with a smile.

"Really? Why, that's most interesting. Mellishe—the elder brother—is a capital chap, and I've often heard of Cyril, although I've not met him. If he's anything like Harold, he a very good fellow. Do you and Frank like him?"

"Very much. It is not, perhaps, quite the marriage we should have chosen, but Betty is extremely happy, and Cyril adores her. He is in the Engineers, as you probably know."

"Yes. When's the marriage to be?"

"Probably in June. It is not quite decided. We thought you would be very pleased, and we have heard quite a lot about you in a roundabout way from Cyril. His brother writes very fully, I believe, and Kultänn is a constant topic of conversation between Betty and Cyril."

The smile died out of Richard's face, and he uttered a short laugh.

"I should think they might find a more profitable subject to discuss," he said bitterly.

Lady Hilda lifted her eyebrows and looked at him quietly.

"You see, we don't agree about that," she said. "Frank and Betty and I believe in your work with all our hearts."

Richard looked straight at her, and his face softened a little.

"I did not think you would," he said. "I was always rather the black sheep in your estimation."

She smiled a little, remembering boyish escapades, then signed an assent.

"Yes, years ago. You have proved your worth since then, Richard. You are a strong man, . . . and I have learnt many things since those days."

He made no answer, and she went on.

"You will allow me to send for your things," she said. "Will you give Charles your address, and he shall fetch them."

With a sudden gesture of protest he rose.

"It's very good of you," he said quickly, "but I will stay at my hotel. It is much better that I should. Please don't mistake me. It is very kind, but I would rather not come here. You must please excuse me."

She looked up at him for a moment, then, rising too, faced him.

"Ah, but that is just what I will not do!" she said. "Frank would be very angry and hurt, and so should I. This is your home, Richard. Surely you will not be so ungracious as to refuse to come to it!"

He stood for a moment motionless, then lifted his head with the curious quick defiance she knew of old.

"It is not a question of ungraciousness, Hilda," he said; "that you know. But the thing is impossible."

"I do not agree with you," she replied. "It is the most natural thing in the world."

"Pardon me, it is not. To all intents and purposes, I have returned with a very ugly suspicion attached to my name—a man who's down, done for, whose prospects are ruined. Whether they are or not is beside the point just at present; the fact remains the same, that the world thinks so, and I do not choose to bring my disgrace into this house."

For a moment she hesitated, not knowing how to answer him; she was fully as reserved as he, and the fact of the latent antagonism that had always existed between them made the task of putting her deepest feelings into speech doubly difficult. She glanced at his face, with its strong jaw and chin and stern eyes, noting anew the signs of suffering it bore; then, with an effort, moved a step nearer to him, and spoke.

"My dear, we can't compel you to come," she said, speaking with unwonted gentleness. "We can only *ask* you. Do not

hurt us by making us feel you do not need our trust or our love. For eight months we have waited anxiously for a word, a sign; are you going to tell us our anxiety was foolish, our longing to have you with us only a nuisance? Richard, will you not come?"

For a moment they faced one another; then Richard's face softened.

"You have made it impossible to refuse," he said. . . . "You know I am grateful, but perhaps you understand how I felt about it."

With characteristic promptitude, Lady Hilda took instant command of the situation, rang the bell, and gave the necessary orders; then, dismissing the whole matter as though it had never been, began speaking of Frank and the chances he had of retaining his seat in the coming General Election.

CHAPTER XVI

THE April sunshine had given place to a day of steady drenching rain, driven at times against the budding trees and shivering earth in fierce gusts of sleet by a furious wind. The skies were grey and cheerless, the roads deep in mud and rain-lashed pools of water.

Evelyn had been obliged to go into the town to do some necessary shopping, and called at the High School for Nancy to drive her home.

School was nearly over, and Nancy, having finished her one afternoon lesson, was supposed to be doing home-lessons, and was in reality writing the last chapter of her first modern story—a lengthy manuscript, wherein Richard Cavanagh figured conspicuously on every page.

It did not take her more than a minute or two to get ready when the message came, and she ran out to the waiting dog-cart, laughing as she got up beside Evelyn.

"I thought it was Lady Duncombe," she said. "Ann came in and said the carriage had called. How silly! Oh, that rain went right in my mouth!"

There was silence for a little as they bowled along, and as they drove Evelyn stole a glance at her little sister.

Nancy was leaning back, her hands thrust into the pockets of her reefer, her face pale, her hair tossed back by the wind, her great dark eyes fixed on the tender luminous yellow of the western sky. Evelyn drew the lash of her whip gently across Brynhilde's back, and spoke.

"Dreaming, Nancy? What is it, dear?"

With a start, Nancy came back to the present; then nodded.

"I was just thinking about Mr. Cavanagh," she said. "I wonder what he's doing, Evelyn. Do you think he will ever come back?"

Evelyn's lips hardened. Unconsciously, she tightened her grip on the reins, and the mare started and quickened her trot. Three days ago Evelyn had read the morning's papers with anger and wondering indignation in her heart. She alone knew the whole truth of the terrible accusation brought against Richard Cavanagh's name, and, knowing, realized the diabolical ingenuity of the accuser. Unknown to anyone, she had ordered a copy of the *Daily Planet*, and read the leader that had set all the mischief afoot, and for two days had pondered upon what she had read. Besides herself there was only one person who knew of Richard's infatuation for Mrs. Leighton, and that was Mrs. Leighton herself. Her husband might have known, but he was dead; and to the cause of his death Evelyn paid no attention, for she knew Richard's hands were as clean in that matter as her own—and the living demanded more attention.

The suspicion that had entered her mind was so horrible that at first she shrank from it incredulously, but it grew and strengthened in spite of herself, until it was formed and full-grown, a suspicion no longer, but a certainty. No one else but Mrs. Leighton could have so worked the ruin of the man who had refused to blindly do her bidding, for the atrocious wickedness of the attack was its substratum of truth.

The fury of hatred that the knowledge engendered within her horrified Evelyn herself in its strength. She had not guessed at the hidden depths in her own nature, and they appalled her, now that they were stirred by the revelation of a woman's heartless wickedness.

Added to her certainty of knowledge was the pain of silence, the silence that sealed her lips even from Gifford. She alone knew the truth, and she was powerless to speak.

For ten years she had faced her future boldly, her courage never failing, her hope never dying, but now her strength

was ebbing, and she knew it. The man she loved had passed out of her life—for all she knew, he might be dead long months ago—and she was alone to face the future as best she might.

Just after Christmas she had heard of Mrs. Leighton's marriage to Prince Boris Liadov, and since then she had waited day by day to hear from Richard. No letter had come. No one knew where he was; neither Gifford nor Sir George had heard a word from Kultänn since the previous September, nine months ago; and Evelyn herself had received no letter since the one that had come to her on the same evening as the knowledge of Norman Leighton's murder; and of all things this silence had been the hardest to bear, the thing that had taxed her strength and her courage to the breaking-point.

The golden autumn had given place to winter, and the winter dragged itself along, a succession of grey days and weary nights—nights when Evelyn lay sleepless, gazing weary-eyed into the darkness, waiting for the dawn to renew the dying hope to which she clung so desperately. Her pride upheld her through the dreadful days that followed the time when she gave up hope, spurring her on to face the world gallantly, with only an added remoteness in her manner, a gentle indescribable aloofness and withdrawal from those around, warning them not to approach too nearly or question as to the reason of that indescribable change.

This afternoon she had driven out, partly because someone had to go into the town, and she preferred not to send a servant, partly because she hoped it would dispel the dull headache that for days had tormented her. The hope was vain, for as she turned into the drive the dull grinding pain was more insistent than ever.

Nancy jumped down almost before the dogcart came to a standstill, and held out her hand to Evelyn, looking up into her face rather anxiously.

"You're looking awfully pale, Evelyn," she said. "Is your head still aching?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is, dear. Run in quickly; it is beginning to rain again."

Nancy obeyed, swinging her satchel listlessly, and went up to her room to change her things and finish her chapter before tea. The change was quickly accomplished, and, seizing her manuscript, she ran up to the big attic in a corner of which she worked on a three-legged and rickety table. She

sat down, opened the book, wrote a sentence, crossed it out, and then, the end of her bone penholder between her teeth, sat motionless, staring out of the dormer window.

The rain had come on again, and was lashing itself against the panes and drifting in sheets over the water-meadows; the bare tree-branches cowered and shivered under the cruel onslaught; the narcissi and daffodils in the garden beds lay battered on the cold earth, their delicate stalks broken, their fair petals stained and spoilt. The dreariness of the whole scene came over the child in a great wave of depression. The outer world was cheerless as the inner, for her story had for the time being ceased to interest her—its scenes to charm, its endless possibilities to fascinate, its characters to live. The doors of Nancy's world were shut in her face, and she stood shivering without them. Richard Cavanagh had gone right out of her life, and the make-believe Richard Cavanagh, the hero of the book, ceased to be sufficient just then. The world of illusion and make-believe was unreal and foolish and vain. The world outside, the rain-lashed windows, the grey, cheerless world around her, was real; all the rest was vanity. The dreams would return, the gates would open again, but the present was desolate, and Nancy sat with her chin in her hands, her shoulders hunched up, her eyes wide and dreary, her pale little face set and strangely unchildlike.

Downstairs Evelyn changed her wet things, and went to the drawing-room, the prey of an exhausting headache and heavy desolation of heart—the desolation of physical weariness and lost hope.

Diana was reading by the fire, and looked up as she entered.

"Hullo! You're back? Why, Evelyn, how tired you look!"

Evelyn crossed the room and rang for tea, smiling a little at the consternation of Diana's face.

"I have rather a tiresome headache," she replied. "Just one of those grumbling ones that are not really severe, but make you think they are. Don't pity me! You mustn't make me get sorry for myself."

"Sorry for yourself! I rather wish you would be!" Diana retorted. "You shouldn't have gone out in the rain."

"I thought it would do me good," Evelyn answered apologetically. "But I shall be all right after tea. Is that an interesting book, Di?"

Diana checked a sigh as she handed the book in question to her cousin. It was always the same. Evelyn refused to be looked after, or to look after herself. To try to take care of her was useless, for she merely turned the subject, and refused quite courteously, but quite firmly, to discuss her health.

Tea was brought in, and the maid handed the afternoon post to her mistress. Evelyn took the letter, saw the first was from Gifford, and opened it rather listlessly. Her headache was getting decidedly worse, and it was an effort to make herself even read her brother's letter. She saw with secret relief that it was very short, and read it through before the meaning of the words penetrated to her brain.

"DEAREST EVELYN,

"Cavanagh is back in London. I saw him last night. He's very pulled down, and wants a rest, and if its quite convenient, I want to send him to Pangley for a few days. He wants the quiet, and town is bad for him just now. I thought of telling him to come on Friday. Wire me if it's inconvenient. In haste.

"Yours ever,
"Gifford.

"P.S.—Don't let him be by himself more than you can help. His own company is the worst possible thing for him just now."

Evelyn stared at the letter uncomprehendingly, the words dancing before her eyes; she felt her pulses begin to beat feverishly, and her breath came in the short, quick pants of an exhausted runner. For a moment her head swam; then the room steadied, its outlines cleared, and she spoke, conscious that her voice shook with the tumult of her senses.

"Di, what's to-day?"

"Thursday," Diana replied promptly; and Evelyn bit her lips to stifle a little cry of sheer happiness. She spoke incoherently.

"Then to-morrow is Friday? You are sure to-morrow is Friday?"

Diana swung round in her chair and stared at her in amazement.

"Naturally," she said—"quite sure! What else should it be?"

With a little bewildered laugh Evelyn passed her hand over her eyes and brow, the other hand clutching the letter tightly as though she feared it were not real.

"Of course, of course!" she said. "I—I am stupid, but I was so surprised. Diana, Mr. Cavanagh is in England—in London. He is coming here——"

Diana made no attempt to hide her delight at the news, and she sprang to her feet, nearly upsetting the tea-table.

"Mr. Cavanagh? Coming here? Evelyn, how splendid! Oh, I must go and tell Nancy! The child will be nearly off her head with joy!"

She hurried out of the room and sought for Nancy, finding her at last in the attic, still gazing drearily out of the window. She did not turn round as the door opened, and for a moment Diana hesitated to speak, just because she knew how great the contrast would be to her present depression. Then she went swiftly across the room and took hold of her shoulders.

"It's tea-time, Nancy," she said. "And I've some news for you—quite jolly news. You may have three guesses."

Nancy tried to wriggle round, but Diana held her fast.

"No, you're not to look at me," she said. "And you're to try to guess. One—now then!"

Nancy gave a heavy sigh.

"Gifford's got a knighthood."

"No, silly! It isn't near the King's birthday!"

"The Academy results are out, and I've passed."

"No!"

"Er—er—we're going to have a party, or——!"

"No, no; nothing of that sort!" Try as she might, Diana could not quite keep the excitement out of her voice, and Nancy twisted vigorously and faced her. For a moment she searched her cousin's face; then a gleam entered her eyes and lit up her face. She caught Diana's arm with fierce little fingers.

"Di! Di! it isn't—oh, tell me—*quick!* Is it Mr. Cavanagh?"

Diana nodded.

"Yes. He's back in England. He's coming here to-morrow."

She did not finish, for, with a strangled cry, Nancy rushed past her and out of the room, almost fell downstairs, and tore into the dining-room, her face white with excitement, her eyes shining with radiant joy.

"Evelyn! Evelyn! He's coming! He's coming! Diana told me—oh!"

She flung herself into Evelyn's lap, hugging her closely, her slim figure trembling from head to foot, her breath coming hard and fast, and Evelyn was forced to control herself to quiet the child.

"Nancy! Nancy, darling—hush! Don't tremble so! Yes, he's coming. Gifford has written to me. He is back in England. Come, dear, sit down and have some tea quietly."

Nancy obeyed in so far that she sat down near by and swallowed a few mouthfuls of bread-and-butter, but she was far too excited to eat, and Evelyn could not but excuse her when her own pulses were beating so feverishly, and her own nerves strung to the highest pitch.

Tea was the scantiest meal, only Diana being rational enough to enjoy it, and immediately after tea Nancy flew to the schoolroom to tell the boys the news, and Evelyn went up to her own room, fell on her knees by the bedside and sobbed broken prayers of thanksgiving.

It was nearly dark and very cold when she rose, but she felt immeasurably relieved, and, lighting the fire herself—for she did not wish anyone to see her just yet—she set to work to remove the traces of her tears, and then, conscious suddenly how tired out she was, she pulled the couch up to the fire, unlocked her door, and, lying down, fell asleep.

The touch of lips on her cheek roused her, and she stirred, opened her eyes, looked round in bewilderment, and saw Gifford standing beside her. He laughed as he saw the dismay on her face.

"Well, this is a nice time of day to find you fast asleep!" he said. "Do you know it's nearly dinner-time?"

Evelyn rose to a sitting posture, looked at her hair, which she had taken down before she slept, and for the moment wondered what had happened; then memory and rapture returned together, and Gifford saw the joy flash into her eyes, and his own grew tender.

"Is it really?" she said. "Oh, I am sorry! I was so tired that I lay down to rest, and must have slept at once! How dreadful! But I will dress now, dear—oh, and there is no fire in your room! I did not know you were coming!"

"I didn't know myself till the last minute, and Ellen can easily light the fire after dinner. As for going to sleep, it was

the best thing in the world for you to do. You got my letter, dear ? ”

He paused by the door as he spoke, and a sudden rose-flush crept over Evelyn's face and neck.

“ Yes,” she said, hardly above her breath, and then, mastering herself, rose to her feet and lit the gas with unsteady fingers.

“ I want to ask you a great many questions,” she added ; “ and, of course, I am just delighted with your news. But you must go and dress now, dear, or we shall both be late.”

The gentle formality of her words did not in the least deceive him, and he smiled to himself as he left her, and whistled all the while he dressed, despite the bitter coldness of his room and the exceeding hunger of his inner man.

For once in her life Evelyn was late for dinner, but no one minded, and when she came in there was a tender soft radiance in her eyes, a gentle gaiety in her manner, an indescribable change, an added graciousness ; and Gifford, looking at her, was struck anew by her amazing beauty, and realized that here, and here only, was the woman who might heal the heart of his friend.

That evening Evelyn retired early, and when she was ready for bed slipped on a warm dressing-gown and went to her brother's room, for she knew he wished to speak to her, and Nancy lay asleep in the little white bed near Evelyn's own, and might be disturbed.

Gifford was waiting for her, and a big easy-chair was drawn up to the fire for her opposite his own. He rose and put her into it, wrapped a rug round her, lest she should be cold, and kissed her.

“ You don't mind if I smoke, do you ? ” he said. “ And I won't keep you long, but I wanted to tell you a little about Richard.”

She did not speak, and after a moment he began to tell her a little of what Richard Cavanagh had said to him and to Sir George three days before. As he ended, he threw his cigarette-stump into the fire, and rose.

“ He'll tell you all about it, I expect,” he said, looking down at her. “ But I wanted you just to understand. Don't leave him to himself much, Evelyn ; it will be bad for him if you do. To tell the truth, I'm a trifle anxious about him. . . . I don't mean that he's ill, but he's suffering from two things—the first sheerly physical, for he's nearly worn out, and he's

feeling the results of seven months' goodness knows what sort of life, in the back of beyond—exposure, starvation, fever, and hardship, all undertaken long before he was fit for any exertion after that cholera. The second is almost graver, and that is severe mental strain. He is a strong man in every sense of the word; but the strongest man may overtax his strength, and he's overtaxed his. His iron will has spurred him on over obstacles that other men would have found insurmountable, but there must come a time when the most inflexible will is powerless, the time of sheer physical breakdown. And it's for that reason I want him to come down here. He'll be away from the things in town that remind him every day of his present painful position. It's quiet and restful, and quiet is what he needs above everything else. . . . Keep him well occupied in the sense that he doesn't have hours of time on his hands; encourage him to be out of doors, to listen to Nancy's stories, to ride with you, to do everything that can interest him and will rest his brain and his nerves. He's all on edge as it is. Good heavens, what a professional lecture I'm giving you! But I wanted you to thoroughly understand his present state."

Evelyn lifted her eyes to his as he ended.

"I quite understand," she said. "Thank you for speaking so fully."

Gifford nodded.

"That's all right, then. And now I mustn't keep you up any longer. What about Nancy's throat? Has it given any more trouble?"

"No, no more. I think with care it will be all right. I am glad you were able to come down to-night, dear. Good-night!"

He went with her to her door, and for a long time she lay awake, listening to the splash of the rain on the window, and the roar of the wind in the chimney, watching the firelight flickering on the walls, and thinking of the morrow's meeting, hardly able to believe that before another night should come she and Richard would have met once more.

A curious sense of unreality surrounded her; she could not believe that the news of the previous night was really true, and she moved and talked as though in a dream. Gifford left immediately after breakfast, and as the rain had ceased and the morning was brilliantly fine, he suggested that Evelyn should walk part of the way with him to the station.

Thinking the fresh morning air might clear away the odd mist that seemed to enfold her brain, she consented, and they started out together.

It was a beautiful morning, the sky a vividly brilliant blue, with more than a hint of spring in the fresh cool air that was exhilarating to breathe and touched the face like a caress. The meadows were vividly green, the hedges already showing swollen brown buds amidst the darkness of bare twigs. The roads were splashed with great pools of water that reflected the clear blue sky, flashing it back in sheets of brilliant delicate colour.

From the smaller trees in the garden came the twitter and chirp of some mistle and song thrushes, and as Gifford and Evelyn turned out of the gates, the sweet long call of an early blackbird and the "peek-peek" of a pair of chiff-chaffs flitting in and out amongst the bushes, while over and above the song of the smaller birds, borne on the romping April wind, came the busy cawing of rooks, building in the trees beyond the road. The whole air was full of sound; the roar and rush of the joyous wind, the song and twitter of the birds, the rustle of the swaying branches, the cawing of the rooks, all formed together one vast glad riot of sound, and to Evelyn in her present state the life and movement and clear beauty of the morning was like some potent wine.

She felt her headache getting momentarily less, her brain clearing, her tired nerves regaining their normal tone, and when she bid Gifford good-bye her cheeks were flushed with delicate colour, and her eyes were clear and bright.

"I'll be down on Sunday," he said. "Don't forget what I told you, and don't overtire yourself. Good-bye!"

The joy of the spring morning awoke an answering joy within her, and the glorious air was like wine as she breathed. The beauty of newly awakened life appealed to her this morning as it had never appealed before, Nature-lover though she was. As she turned in the gates of the Chase, she paused a moment just to gaze at and enjoy the brown beds of spring flowers—yellow daffodils; narcissi, pure and delicate; hyacinths, many-coloured and heavy with scent; and the quaint bordering of prim little crocuses, white, yellow, and blue.

The wind roared through the tossing branches, dying to a whisper over the sheltered beds, laughing as it romped on its way, and Evelyn laughed, too, in sheer unreasoning

happiness. The man she loved was coming back to her, and she would see his face again.

Diana saw her standing on the wet gravel, and came out to her, careless of the cool morning air, the wind ruffling her hair wildly.

"There's a letter for you ; it came by the second post," she said ; and as Evelyn took it, she saw it was directed in Richard's writing. For one moment her heart stood still, fearing something had happened to prevent his coming ; then she opened the envelope, and saw her fears were vain. The letter was very brief.

"DEAR EVELYN,

"Gifford has ordered me out of town, and wishes me to come to Pangley for a few days, as he imagines I want a rest. He tells me he has already written to you to tell you of his plans ; but, as I can readily understand, it is possible you may very naturally object to such an arbitrary disposal of your hospitality, so please wire at once if you do not want me. I trust you to do this, as Gifford's fears are quite unfounded. I am not very good company at present, and I do not feel disposed to be even decently agreeable, so don't hesitate to put me off. With kind regards,

"Yours sincerely,

"RICHARD CAVANAGH."

The letter was so formal, so utterly unlike himself, that Evelyn's eyes grew pitiful, reading between the lines, and, folding the letter closely, she slipped it in her blouse, and, making some casual remark to Diana, went indoors.

He did not want to come, that was evident ; but the reason was evident also, arising as it did from very great bitterness of soul, and Evelyn understood and thought she was content to wait till he should need her help.

The room next her own was Hugh's, on the rare occasions that he was at home, and, though not very large, it was bright and sunny and faced south, while the two rooms usually given to visitors were at the farther end of the corridor, and both faced north. For a moment Evelyn hesitated ; then the instinct that mingles so strangely and intimately with a woman's love for a man—the instinct of maternity, tender and protective, be the man a very giant of strength or be he weak and helpless—prompted her, and she began to prepare for him the room next her own.

She stripped the spare rooms relentlessly of anything that might add to the charm of this one, made his bed herself, giving him the finest linen she had, fragrant with lavender and soft as silk, hung the daintiest curtains at the windows, brought in one of her own most comfortable chairs, and placed some of her newest and most interesting books on the little ebony table at its side; then, content at last, went downstairs and out into the garden.

Opposite Gifford's study window, sheltered from the wind, was a big bed of violets, and here Evelyn paused, the scent from them rising fragrantly on the cool air, the flowers themselves clustering thickly under their shining leaves.

Evelyn picked industriously for ten minutes, but so thick were the blossoms that she could hardly see from where the big handfuls had been culled, and she buried her face in the cool wet petals as she carried them indoors to Richard's room.

Nancy came in, flushed and panting, having run most of the way home, and Evelyn granted her a half-holiday, knowing perfectly well that it would be useless to expect her to do any work even if she went to school.

"Are you going to meet Mr. Cavanagh?" Diana asked as they rose from the table.

Evelyn shook her head.

"I think not," she said. "Perhaps you would go; Diana—you and Nancy?"

"With pleasure," Diana answered; and Nancy uttered a shriek of joy and rushed out into the garden with Alec, just because she could not bear the confinement of the house in her present state of rapturous excitement.

Just as they were starting to the station came a telegram from Hugh:

"Expect me to-night. News."

And Evelyn, who had looked forward to half an hour's rest, realized that Hugh's bedroom was not available, and another must be got ready at once.

She had just finished making all arrangements when Richard Cavanagh arrived.

She heard the trap turn in at the gates, and ran downstairs to the sunny drawing-room—the room in which she had parted from him nearly three years ago—and then stood holding on to a chair because she felt herself trembling from head to foot. There were sounds of arrival, Nancy's excited laugh, Diana's voice, and then the door opened and Richard came in.

The room swam before Evelyn's eyes, but she went across to him and held out both her hands, not speaking because she could not, careless of what he should think ; and Richard held her hands in a close desperate grip, that gave the lie to the coldness of his voice and eyes.

"How do you do ? It is very good of you to put up with me like this !"

The sound of his voice, clear and composed, brought Evelyn back to herself with a wholesome shock. She looked at him and smiled.

"What nonsense !" she said. "What is the use of friendship if it cannot stand a strain sometimes ! There ! Doesn't that rude remark reassure you ?"

He echoed her laugh, and was saved the necessity of a reply by Alec's violent entrance and half-shy, half-boisterous greeting ; and Evelyn rang the bell.

"You want tea, I'm sure," she said. "I myself am dreadfully thirsty. Come over here and let me look at you !"

She laid her hand on his arm and drew him across to the window, looking eagerly, anxiously, into his face ; but what she saw there drove the smile from her eyes, and something of the joy from her heart, and with a sudden movement she turned away and went across to the tea-table. Richard followed her, and Nancy, entering at that moment, drew a chair close to his.

"Oh, it's lovely to have you back !" she exclaimed. "I can't quite believe it's true, but I know it must be. Evelyn gave me a holiday this afternoon. You are going to stay quite a long time, aren't you, Mr. Cavanagh ?"

"Only a few days, I think," he said. "I have promised to get back to town on business. How you've grown, Nancy !"

"I'm nearly fifteen !" Nancy said, smiling. "But I only look older—more grown-up, I mean. I'm not really, I'm afraid."

He looked at her for a moment, and his eyes were sombre.

"Don't be in a hurry," he said. "Everyone grows old too quickly."

During tea the conversation was purely formal, and directly it was over Nancy begged Richard to go round the garden with her and see her new puppy—a fluffy, sprawling Newfoundland, with big clumsy paws and adoring brown eyes ; and as they went out of the room together, Diana turned to her cousin.

"He looks ten years older!" she said. "I have never seen such an alteration in any man before."

Evelyn took up the collar she was embroidering, and nodded.

"Never!" she said. "You are quite right. And it is only three years since we saw him last!"

Diana nodded.

"It is not only his looks that have changed," she said. "It is he himself. If Gifford expects you to undo the work of these three years, and make him the man he was when he went away, your work is cut out for you. He's had a bad time."

"I do not think Gifford expects such an impossibility," Evelyn answered very quietly. "I am very glad, though, that Hugh is coming to-night; he is always a cheering soul. I wonder what his news is?"

Diana took the hint and turned her attention to Hugh, for she thought Evelyn did not wish to discuss Richard Cavanagh just then; as, indeed, was the case, for Evelyn was deeply shocked at the change she saw in him—a change so great she could scarcely credit it. It seemed to her that an impenetrable barrier had risen between them, and that the man who had come back was no more the man to whom she had bidden farewell. He had gone away her friend; he had come back a stranger; and the knowledge hurt her, even though she told herself that he had suffered enough to account for everything.

When Richard went up to dress the fresh earthy scent of the violets that met him as he opened his room door was a tacit reproach to him in his present state of mind, for his coming to Pangleigh had brought him no pleasure, his meeting with Evelyn no renewal of the friendship that had once meant so much to him. He wondered at himself as he dressed, conscious that he was ungrateful, yet too sick at heart to make any effort to be otherwise. He was very tired physically, and all he wanted was to be left utterly alone.

Gifford Chetwynde's friendship was so innately a part of his life that their companionship alone was not irksome to him; but Evelyn's presence, by very reason of her sex, was a painful reminder of all he had suffered—she was a woman, and a woman had fooled and ruined him. The barrier of which she had become aware during the first moment of meeting was one which he felt powerless to remove, even had he been desirous of so doing.

He finished dressing and went down to the drawing-room, to find the room empty and only lit by the firelight, which in his present frame of mind suited him exactly, so he sat down in one of the low chairs by the fire and rested.

Out of doors rain had begun to fall, and he could hear it splashing against the windows, driven on the glass by angry gusts of the rising wind, and the storm without emphasized the warm firelit quiet of the room within.

Three years—only three years! Three years crowded with work and incident, three years ending in—this! What a fool he had been—what a fool!

With a movement of impatience he got up and began pacing up and down the room, turning his thoughts resolutely away from what would not bear thinking about, too suddenly restless to sit still.

It still wanted three minutes to dinner-time when Nancy, slim and tall in her white frock, came in, followed by Evelyn.

"All in the dark? I'm so sorry! Why didn't you ring for lights?" Evelyn exclaimed. "I didn't expect you'd be down so early."

"I liked the firelight better, thank you," Richard answered, throwing his cigarette-end into the fire. "What a rough night it's going to be! Listen to the wind!"

Evelyn crossed to one of the windows, and, drawing aside the curtain, looked out.

"Yes, it is rough! Poor old Hugh! He won't enjoy his walk from the station, and I can't send the trap to meet him, for I don't know which train he'll come by. I suppose you've seen him quite recently?"

"Yesterday. He didn't say he was coming down, but perhaps he didn't know."

"Perhaps not. Your brother is rather busy just now, I expect, with the Election looming so close ahead."

"Yes, he is. I've hardly seen him this last two days, and when Hugh isn't with him he's with my sister-in-law. He's very devoted to Hilda, and as she is working almost as hard for Frank as Frank is for himself, Hugh is kept pretty busy between the two of them."

Evelyn laughed a little as she came back to the fireside.

"It's very good for him," she said. "I had my doubts about it once, but they exist no longer. Ah! dinner is ready."

Hugh arrived at nine o'clock, very wet and very excited, and began shouting his news to Evelyn in the drawing-room,

while he changed into dry clothes somewhere between his bedroom door and the head of the stairs.

"Old Leamington spotted that head I did of Miss Cavanagh, and he admired it awfully, and asked whose it was; and Lady Hilda said me, and the old chap was frightfully impressed, and he said—— Hi, Evelyn! Are you listening? Can you hear?"

Evelyn, seated just inside the wide-open drawing-room door, looked across at Richard, and laughed.

"Yes," she called. "But do be quick and come down! I'm getting a fearful cold, and Diana is positively shivering!"

Hugh's retort, judging from its smothered brevity, was given from the folds of a shirt.

"Blow Diana!"

Then, more distinctly:

"Tell her to sit nearer the fire!"

Richard broke into a laugh, and, getting up, went out into the hall.

"We're *all* shivering!" he exclaimed. "And we won't listen to any more till you come down. Go and finish dressing, and be quick!"

Hugh's rejoinder was lost, owing to Richard re-entering the room and promptly shutting the door.

"Young ruffian!" he said, laughing. "He was dancing about most indecently clad, and raging with excitement of some sort. I wonder what's been happening."

"Perhaps it's Gifford's knighthood!" Nancy murmured softly, and Evelyn raised amused eyes to Richard's.

"That's Nancy's one ambition for Gifford," she said.

"No, it isn't—quite!" Nancy hastened to say. "It's a peerage *really*! I think it would be so nice if he was *first* Sir Gifford Chetwynde, and then Lord—Lord—Lord Pangle!"

Richard gave a shout, and Nancy chuckled, not a whit disconcerted.

"Well, I would! Lord Pangle—Gifford, Lord Pangle—would sound awfully nice, and Gifford deserves a title far more than heaps of stupid old aldermen and butchers and things like that who get them! He's done good to people!"

She was still warmly defending her opinion when Hugh came in a few minutes later, invading the quiet room with the infection of his excitement. He greeted everyone with scant ceremony, and plunged into his recital.

"Where had I got to? Oh, old Leamington, of course! Well, he said all sorts of flattering things, and talked to Lady Hilda by the yard, and finally wrote to me two days afterwards, and asked me to paint his wife's portrait—just the head, you know; sort of study thing, like Miss Cavanagh's. And, of course, I told Lady Hilda about it, because I couldn't undertake a commission like that and do my work with Mr. Cavanagh, and equally I couldn't throw up my appointment and leave him in the lurch with a new secretary on the eve of a General Election; so the upshot of it was that Leamington heard the truth, and it got to Gifford's ears, and three days ago the chief had a long talk with me."

He paused a moment to take breath, and Evelyn leant forward, her eyes shining, her face eager.

"Yes, dear? What then?" she said.

"Well, then we thrashed the matter out, and Gifford came round, and we talked and talked. And, finally, we settled that I am to stay till after the Election, and then resign and take up painting for good and always! Think of that, Evelyn! And that dear old brick shall have his wife's portrait the very first thing, and he says, if it's as good as Betty's—Miss Cavanagh's, I mean—he'll see that I get as many commissions as I can execute! Now, wasn't that news enough to be worth sitting with the door open for? Tell me!"

Evelyn got up from her chair, and, crossing to his side, bent and kissed him.

"I'm more pleased than I can say," she said. "Oh, my dear, it's the best news in the world, and not a bit better than you deserve."

Richard, too, leant forward, and laid his hand on Hugh's knee for a moment.

"I'm delighted to hear it!" he exclaimed heartily; "and you thoroughly deserve it, for you've worked like a brick."

Hugh looked from his sister to Richard and back again, flushing hotly.

"Oh, that's all rot, you know," he said, boyishly embarrassed at such unexpected and personal tributes. "Anyone would work for your brother—and I've no use for slackers. But it's awfully good of you—of both of you! I say! I wish you'd let me paint your portrait!"

He faced round on Richard with a rather startling suddenness, but Richard shook his head.

"Some time, perhaps," he said; "but for the present you might be better employed. Why don't you do Nancy's?"

"By Jove, yes! Nancy, come here!"

He caught his little sister by the arm, and stared at her, whereupon Nancy made a grimace at him and dropped on her knees by Evelyn's side, laughing up at him, and quite secure of her sister's protection. To her surprise, Hugh did not execute summary justice upon her, but uttered a shout.

"Don't move! Stop just as you are! No! Lift your chin a little higher! Look at Evelyn! That's right! By Gad, what a picture! Look at it, you others!"

The light fell sharply on the heads of the two sisters, and as Nancy knelt by Evelyn's side, her curly dark head was resting against Evelyn's cheek, her dark eyes looking adoringly into Evelyn's face. The contrast was startling, the beauty of the study beyond question, and Hugh grabbed Richard by the arm and shook him.

"Isn't it fine? Won't it come off? By Jove, I'll make London sit up!"

"Yes, I think you will," Richard answered quietly enough. "But at the present moment, if I were Nancy, I should have a broken neck!"

Released by the eager Hugh from a most uncomfortable position, Nancy flopped on to the rug, and Evelyn proposing bridge, they made up a four, Hugh and Diana playing Evelyn and Richard. The game was rather a failure, owing to Hugh being so absorbed with the idea of painting Evelyn's and Nancy's portrait that he revoked twice, trumped his partner's tricks, and broke off in the midst of an exciting no-trump hand to alter the position of a lamp near by, so that he could study a different shadow effect on Evelyn's face. Diana stormed and raged in vain, and the other two laughed derisively at the score, and watched Hugh's vagaries with delight.

The latter part of the evening passed more successfully than the former, and when Evelyn rose to say good-night she felt relieved to think that Hugh would be staying for a couple of days at least, for his gaiety was infectious, and it was impossible to brood or worry in his company. Rather to her surprise, Richard rose also.

"I think I shall go to bed, too," he said. "I'm rather tired. Will you excuse my leaving you to smoke in solitude, Hugh?"

"Certainly. What's the time? Eleven? Oh, I'm off

too ! I love going to bed here, because Evelyn always makes one's room so cosy, and the pillows smell as though they were full of lavender. I'll go round the doors, Evelyn, and just put my head into your room, if I may, later."

Upstairs Evelyn went into Richard's room, looked round to see if he had all he wanted, poked the fire to dancing brightness, and straightened herself from the task as he came in.

"I think you've everything," she said, smiling. "Breakfast is at nine—nominally. If you want anything, will you tell Hugh ? He's just across the hall—that room."

Richard glanced round, and his eyes rested for a moment on the bowl of violets on the table by his bed.

"How beautiful they are !" he said inconsequently. "Did they come out of the garden ?"

Evelyn lifted the bowl a moment, and rested her face against the cool fragrance of the blossoms.

"Yes, I picked them this morning. See ! there are some white ones—are they not lovely ? I hope you don't object to having flowers in your room ? I always love them so, and they are such a welcome."

She put the bowl back on the table, straightened a corner of the sheet that had been carelessly turned down, then gathered her soft white skirts about her and prepared to go to her room, just as a furious gust of wind drove a sheet of rain on the window with a scream and a rush.

"It is rough !" she said ; "I am so glad you did not come later, or you would have shared Hugh's fate and been drenched." She moved to the door, and, pausing, held out her hand, calling him by his name for the first time since they had met again. "Good-night, Richard," she said. "Sleep well !"

He took her hand and looked into her eyes.

"Good-night, Evelyn," he said, hesitated as though about to say more, then drew back and held open the door for her to pass. "Good-night !" he repeated. "It is very kind of you to have me."

Evelyn laughed a little as she went out of the room.

"That, of course, is a matter of opinion," she said. "Good-night !"

He echoed her good-night as the door closed, and then threw himself into the low chair placed invitingly near the fire ; and, because he did not want to think, he picked up a novel and began to read.

As Evelyn lay watching the firelight flickering over the walls, half an hour later, and listening to the rumble of the wind in the chimney, and the rush and swirl of the rain on the casement, Nancy, supposed to be asleep two hours ago, lifted her head from the pillow and looked across at her sister.

"It's just like the night after Mr. Cavanagh went away, isn't it?" she said sleepily. "Do you remember how frightened I was, Evelyn? How jolly it is to have him in the next room!"

CHAPTER XVII

EVELYN woke early, and lay for a moment wondering what was the reason of the depression that weighed so heavily upon her. Richard had come; he was in the very next room, safe and well, and yet, instead of the joy she had expected to feel, was the blank dreariness of a very bitter disappointment. She had longed intensely for the moment of meeting, and now that it had come she was conscious that it had been utterly unsatisfying, strangely meaningless. Richard had gone away her friend; he had come back a stranger.

Thinking of Gifford's advice, she wondered how in the world she was to carry it out, for she saw that Richard was in no mood to submit to any watchful care, be it never so unobtrusive.

Nancy, too, child as she was, had noticed the difference in him, and to her this morning the world was a dreary place. Richard had returned; he had come into the house as though it were but yesterday that he had left it, but he had not kissed her! And she had outgrown the childish unconsciousness that would not have waited for the caress, but have given it unsought.

Richard and Hugh came down together, and Evelyn roused herself from unprofitable musing, and bid them good-morning with a smile and serene eyes, cutting short decisively Richard's apologies for the lateness of the hour.

"My dear Richard, I assure you it doesn't in the least matter!" she said. "I'm very glad you slept well. And as there's nothing to do all day, I think you showed unusual

wisdom in staying in bed. Hugh, I want to hear all about your plans for the future. I'm sure you have some."

"Hundreds!" Hugh replied promptly. "They're all madder than each other, and I'll tell you every one—presently. Mr. Cavanagh, what are you going to do this morning? Golf? Ride?"

Richard looked across at Evelyn. "Let's play golf," he said; "I haven't played for years."

"There's Sultan at your disposal," Evelyn hastened to say. "Would you care to ride this afternoon? If so, tell me at luncheon."

"Talking of horses," Hugh exclaimed, before Richard had time to reply, "what a gorgeous beast you were riding yesterday! She hated the traffic pretty thoroughly, too, didn't she! Where in the world did you get her?"

Evelyn was passing a cup of coffee to her brother, and, glancing at Richard as Hugh spoke, saw a look on his face that horrified her by the intensity of pain it expressed. It was only a fleeting glimpse, but long enough to show her that the icy restraint was but a mask, and that his inflexible will alone held him from giving any sign of his anger and rebellion.

Almost before she realized what she had seen, Richard was answering Hugh's question, no hint of emotion of any kind in the courteous formality of his manner.

"She was a gift to me just before I left India," he said. "Yes, you're right—she's a magnificent animal—three parts Arab."

"How did you get her home, then?" Hugh asked. "Because you did not come straight back, did you?"

"I sent her home in charge of a man I knew, who was sailing by the next boat," he replied. "I hated parting with her, but it couldn't be helped. Yes, she certainly does hate London traffic! Not used to it, you see."

"I should like to see you take her across country," Hugh said. "By Jove, she'd be worth watching! All right, then; golf be it this morning. How funny! Do you remember that you played golf with me the day you left?"

"Did I?" Richard said. "Yes, I seem to remember it."

The talk drifted on in a dilatory way, and soon after breakfast the two men set out for the links, and Evelyn was left to busy herself with the hundred and one duties that require performing in a well-appointed house, and to

try to realize the position in which she stood with regard to Richard Cavanagh.

He was no longer the man who had told her of his very inmost heart, no longer the friend who had admitted her into the innermost recesses of his nature ; he was a stranger, remote, formal, aloof. It was not just the difficulty of reunion after a long absence, but the deliberate choice of a man whose dearest hopes have been shattered—the attitude of defence he chose to adopt against a curious, clamouring world.

Before the change these three years had wrought in him, Evelyn stood aghast and helpless, realizing his bitterness and grim determination to stand absolutely alone before the world.

The afternoon he spent in the study with Hugh, and when she went to tell them tea was waiting she found them both reading, and enveloped in a blue cloud of smoke. In so far as courtesy permitted, he avoided her, and she, knowing the reason, pitied, even while she resented, his behaviour. It was hardly to be wondered at, and this visit was Gifford's order, not his own wish ; and Evelyn knew she was foolish to grieve, yet his persistent formality hurt her. Was it always to be thus ? Must she lose even his friendship and the dear intimacy she had treasured so tenderly ? And as the days passed it seemed that they answered her question bitterly enough.

Hugh was lunching with a friend at Micklebury, some ten miles away, on Saturday, and motored off early ; and on the Monday following Richard's visit terminated, and as Evelyn watched him at luncheon, Gifford's words reiterated themselves with double significance, and she realized that he would blame her for her remissness in not obeying his commands. She was relieved that he would himself be at Pangleigh that evening, but she felt powerless before Richard's impenetrable reserve, even though she knew Gifford was right, and that he was almost at the end of his strength.

Halfway through luncheon Richard announced his intention of going for a long walk, and Evelyn, mindful of her promise to her brother, offered to accompany him.

"We have not had one of our old tramps together yet, have we ? " she said, trying hard not to let him see her discomfort. "Let us go over to Yelverton."

For a moment Richard's resolution wavered as the memory

of what this friendship had once meant came back to him. More than once the sight of Evelyn's face, the sound of her voice, the whole of her gracious personality, had wellnigh broken down his bitter self-restraint, his resolution to stand alone. In spite of himself, the longing for Evelyn's sympathy strengthened day by day till only his iron will held the fierce desire in check. Now, as she offered to accompany him, the temptation assailed him with wellnigh irresistible force. He wanted to tell her the whole miserable story as he had told it to no one yet, and the longing for her sympathy, the aching desire for rest, mental and bodily, was so acute, that it amounted almost to physical pain. For the moment his resolution weakened as his desperate need asserted itself; then with a rush of contempt at even the momentary hesitation, his inflexible will reasserted itself, and the iron entered deeper into his soul. Was he a child that he should want to cry out because he had been hurt? Had he not even the decency to keep his pain to himself? With a sudden fierce impatience he made a gesture of dissent.

"No; I would rather be alone."

Her look of amazement recalled him to the realization of what he had said, and a dull red crept up under his skin.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I did not mean to be rude! Please don't think me quite a brute."

Evelyn rose from the table as he spoke, conscious for the moment of blind and hurt resentment, that gave place, even before she spoke, to pity. Diana had passed out of the room before them, and for the moment they were alone. With a sudden impulse she laid the tips of her fingers on his arm.

"It is not good for you, Richard," she said. "You must know that!"

He smiled a little, and lifted his eyebrows in polite surprise.

"No? Why not?" he said.

The question was disconcerting, and it was Evelyn who flushed. If he chose to take up such an attitude, she was powerless to protect him from himself; even Gifford would admit that. He was waiting for her answer, however, so she spoke lightly, hiding the hurt he had given her.

"Because you are not well, and long walks in this sort of weather are good for no one. Look at it! Damp and muddy, and horribly cold!"

Richard glanced across the sodden garden, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I beg your pardon, but that's absurd!" he said. "I am accustomed to far worse weather than this, and I am perfectly well. I don't know why you should imagine otherwise. Don't wait tea for me—I may be late."

Evelyn knew when a cause was lost, so she made no further attempt to detain him.

"Very well. As you say, it was probably my imagination. I hope you'll have a good walk. It may be pleasanter out than I think!"

She smiled serenely at him, and went into the drawing-room, leaving Richard filling a pipe in the hall preparatory to starting out, and quite conscious that he had behaved abominably. He set out with no very clear idea as to his destination, and tramped along wet roads, and through muddy fields, careless of cold and damp, and finding a certain savage relief in the discomfort of his surroundings.

It was a wretched day, and in his heart of hearts he knew Evelyn had been right; he was not well, and such tramps as these were not good for him. But even so, inaction was unbearable, and by tiring himself to the point of utter physical exhaustion, he might hope to stifle the pain of memory that tortured him day and night.

But already, despite his increasing weariness, he knew his hope was vain, for thought refused to be stifled, and the more his tiredness increased, the more acute became his suffering of mind.

A shout from an angry carter roused him to the realization of his surroundings, and, stepping back on to the path, he waited till the man had driven on with muttered abuse, and then turned towards Pangle. He had walked farther than he knew, and it was getting dusk before he reached the house; and as he entered the hall, Evelyn greeted him with a smile, apparently forgetful of his behaviour earlier in the afternoon.

"Here is a telegram," she said, holding it out. "It came about an hour after you had gone out."

She watched him as he read the telegram, shocked at his appearance, for his face was drawn and white, and he looked utterly exhausted.

"I hope it is not bad news," she said.

He crushed the flimsy paper into a ball, and shook his head.

"Not in the least," he said. "Merely a change in the time of my appointment."

He went on upstairs, and Evelyn returned to the drawing-room, because she was too worried to talk to Diana or Nancy.

Gifford arrived at half-past seven, and went straight up to dress before seeing Evelyn; and seeing there was a light in Richard's room, he knocked and entered.

Richard was standing before the glass, tying his tie, and while he completed the operation Gifford had time to observe him. What he saw did not please him, but he kept his anxiety to himself.

"What a filthy night!" he said disgustedly, sitting on the foot of the bed. "I had a rotten journey, with a baby in the carriage howling the whole way, and a little wretch of a child who trod on my boots and pawed my trousers with sticky hands. How's life been using you, old fellow?"

Richard finished his tie, put on his coat, and lit the cigarette Gifford handed to him.

"Much as usual, thanks," he said. "I've been strenuous and golfed all day."

Gifford blew a meditative ring, and watched it dissolve.

"H'm!" he remarked. "I don't know that I altogether wanted you to be strenuous. However, we'll let it pass. It is good to see you again, old man!"

The old charming smile flashed for a moment across Richard's face.

"The pleasure isn't all on your side," he said. "Many's the time I'd have given a good deal to see your face. By the way, I asked Scott for those particulars you spoke to me about."

"Thanks," Gifford said rather absently, and smoked in silence till Richard intimated that he was ready to go down. He forbore to question his friend, but he was shocked to see how ill he looked, and he longed to question Evelyn, but was unable to get her to himself before dinner was announced.

The talk, desultory at first, turned on the extraordinary political situation, and Hugh, all unconsciously, touched upon a point of some importance.

"Hard luck on old Bright to crock up just now," he remarked. "He revels in the sort of strain we're suffering under at present."

"Who is Bright?" Diana asked. "I don't know his name."

"Editor of the *Planet*. Sweet specimen, Little Englander socialist bounder, and everything else."

"What an indictment!" Evelyn exclaimed. "Is he ill, then?"

Hugh chuckled.

"Yes, it's rather a joke. Somebody's had their knife into him and given him a beautiful time. I'd give something to find out who it is, and shake hands with them."

Gifford set down his glass very carefully, and, avoiding Richard's eyes, turned to his brother.

"Is that so? How do you know?"

Hugh drank a glass of wine in a great hurry.

"He's been sailing perilously near the wind for some time," he said. "The other day he——" A sudden embarrassment seized him, and he floundered badly. "He—er—got himself into a bit of a mess. His office boy is the chief's page-boy's brother, and the office boy found him half dead in the office. Somebody had thrashed him almost into a pulp. Isn't it fine? I was afraid we were losing our British sense of fair play, but evidently we're not. Anyway, somebody's given him a hiding, and richly he deserved it. I only wish it had been me."

Richard, who had hardly spoken since the beginning of dinner, glanced quickly at Gifford; but Gifford's face was inscrutable, and he learnt nothing from it. Instead, he became increasingly aware of his own discomfort, for there was a cold pricking sensation at the back of his neck that obtruded itself most disagreeably. The lights, too, seemed oddly confused. With the idea of taking his attention from himself, he turned to Diana.

"Hugh ought to adopt a more active way of life than that he has chosen," he said. "Is he always so pugilistic?"

Diana looked across at Hugh and smiled.

"Always. He's an anachronism, you know. Too early or too late. Almost everyone is. I, for instance, am much too early. I should like to live about two hundred years hence. You, I should say, were too late."

"Why?"

"You've a touch of the primeval savage about you. It's rather fine. You're born to deal in big things, and hold authority over fierce people."

The curious sense of unreality was deepening in Richard's brain, but for the moment it fled at her words.

"I'm afraid your opinion is slightly biassed by your imagination," he said, a bitter little smile curling his lips.

"Since I have proved myself to be so very much to the contrary."

Diana flushed hotly at his answer. She had spoken thoughtlessly and blamed herself for so carelessly touching him upon the raw.

"I am sorry," she said, speaking low. "Forgive me."

He smiled at her, and then bit his lip, clutching the edge of the table to steady himself.

"It's all right . . . it doesn't matter," he said, and then the singing in his ears deepened, and the lights receded and grew very small; he rose to his feet with some half-conscious effort to get out of the room. As in a mist he heard Diana's voice with its sharp note of anxiety:

"Mr. Cavanagh . . . Gifford!" and saw Gifford spring up from his seat just as he sank into dark, dreamless silence.

Diana's sharp cry drew everyone's attention, and Gifford saw Richard sway back from the table. He leapt up, but it was Hugh who caught him and guided him to the floor.

"Gifford, he's dead!" he cried, but Gifford pushed him away with a short laugh.

"Don't be an ass!" he said. "He's only fainted. Open that window, and, Evelyn, pass me the water."

They had all risen, and Nancy snatched up the water-bottle and handed it to her sister, and then gripped her hand, her face almost as white as Richard's.

Gifford knelt down by his side, and unfastened his collar, just as the cool night air rushed into the room, making the lamps flicker wildly.

"Do you mind all going out?" he said. "We can finish dinner in a few minutes. Evelyn, will you stay, please?"

Nancy cast an imploring glance at her sister, but Evelyn shook her head, and the child followed Diana and Hugh from the room, and when they were alone, Gifford glanced up with a frown.

"Just what I expected," he said curtly. "Brandy, please. Put your hand under his head. That's right."

Evelyn did as he commanded, her nerves thrilling as she felt his head on her bare arm, his weight against her, all her love for him rising on a flood of passion and tenderness at his helplessness. Despite her anxiety, she trembled with exquisite happiness at the mere touch of him, but Gifford, absorbed in his patient, noticed nothing. After a moment or two, Richard's

eyelids flickered, he moaned a little, then put his hand to his throat.

The first thing he realized was the grateful coolness of the night air on his face, and a man's fingers on his wrist. For a moment he felt too tired to move, then memory reawakened, and he opened his eyes to see Gifford's anxious face.

"Hullo!—what's up?" he said weakly. "Why——"

He became suddenly aware that he was lying down, and that his head lay in the crook of Evelyn's arm, his cheek resting against the cool softness of her skin, and a hot thrill and embarrassment ran through him.

"I—I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed, his annoyance getting the better of his weakness. "I can't think what made me make such a fool of myself."

"I can," Gifford said grimly. "Lie still."

He cared nothing for Richard's embarrassment just then, the physical state being naturally the first thing claiming his attention, but Evelyn saw his vexation, and, woman-like, pitied him. She drew her arm gently from under his head, and put a cushion in its place, while Gifford closed the window.

"Don't trouble about it," she said, smiling down at him as she rose. "It doesn't matter in the least."

"I'm exceedingly sorry. I don't think I've ever fainted in my life before," he said disgustedly. "Look here, Gifford for Heaven's sake, let me stand up and get decently out of the way."

For a moment Gifford did not answer, but stood looking at him with keen grave eyes; then he glanced at Evelyn.

"Very well. You may come into the study and be quiet. Take my arm."

Frowning angrily, Richard obeyed, and Evelyn waited till he had had time to be installed comfortably in a chair, then she summoned the others to come back to the dining-room, and finish the interrupted dinner.

As Gifford entered, Hugh turned to him anxiously.

"Is he better?" he demanded. "What's up? What made him go off like that? Is he ill?"

"Yes, he's better," Gifford said curtly. "Oh, he's been overdoing it a bit. Pass me the grapes, please, Nancy."

Nancy obeyed silently. She had not spoken a word, and Evelyn felt sorry for her, for she could see the child was suffering acute anxiety; but Gifford was in his most

unapproachable mood, and she knew better than to question him.

Directly dinner was over, Gifford went to Evelyn.

"I want you," he said, and slipping his hand within her arm, led her into the hall. Evelyn looked at him closely.

"Gifford, is he ill?" she asked. "If so, I don't wonder. He has done everything he ought not, I think, this week. I'm not a bit surprised, but I'm helpless. He seems determined to go his own way in spite of everything."

For a moment Gifford's face softened.

"Poor old chap, I don't wonder," he said. "Perhaps this will pull him up a little. Look here, Evelyn, go in presently and talk to him, will you?"

She did not answer at once, and Gifford, seeing her hesitation, looked surprised.

"Why not?" he asked.

Evelyn was annoyed with herself that he should have noticed it, but she felt it was best to be frank.

"I think he would rather I did not," she said. "He is not like himself. He would regard it as an intrusion."

Gifford frowned angrily. His plans for Richard's mental and physical recovery seemed to be all going awry, and his professional anxiety was roused, and he was thoroughly worried over his friend's condition. He had hoped much from this quiet week with Evelyn, and as he stood looking at her half unconsciously while he thought, he found Richard's behaviour hard to understand.

Evelyn was not watching him, but had moved to the hearth, and was standing by the fire, one foot on the curb, her head bent a little, as she watched the dancing flames. Something in her attitude, a half-unconscious weariness, smote him with self-reproach. Knowing her secret, he felt he had injured her, for in his anxiety with regard to Richard he had sacrificed her without a thought. In his great love for his friend, he had wellnigh forgotten the pain Evelyn might be called upon to suffer.

As he realized his carelessness, she lifted her head and looked at him.

"If you particularly wish it I will go," she said. "But I don't think it will do any good."

Gifford buried his hands in his pockets, and leant against the high mantelshelf, his frown growing deeper.

"Nor do I," he said. "I can do nothing with him. He

seems determined to take no care of himself. I took the liberty of writing to Scott about him—the medical officer at Kultänn—asking for particulars about him. I expect his report in about a month ; but if Richard goes on like this, it won't be any good to me. He seems to have lost all interest in life, and yet he doesn't whine. I wish he did. I'd know what to do with him then."

He broke off, kicking the curb impatiently, and Evelyn nodded.

"I know," she said. "It is just that. He has shut himself away from everyone. His reserve is impenetrable. One might as well try to soften a block of granite . . . he resents all efforts to look after him . . . and yet I cannot bear to think he has ruined his whole future."

"I know, and I am certain he has not. But if he goes on like this he will alienate everyone, and damn his chances utterly. And yet it's no good. I can't leave him to himself when I know that he's breaking his heart. For he is . . ."

He paused a moment, then looked into Evelyn's eyes, and she saw his lashes were wet. With a swift movement she crossed to his side and put her arm within his, not speaking, but letting the caress convey her sympathy, and Gifford understood. He covered her fingers with his, and spoke a little unsteadily.

"I can't stand it," he said. "He's eating his heart out . . . one gets pretty well hardened to suffering, but when it comes to—someone you love . . . it hits hard."

He broke off, biting his lip, then passed his hand across his eyes, and for a moment leant his head against Evelyn's.

"I don't know why I should add to your worries," he said. "But you have a fatal way of making everyone tell you their troubles . . . even I have not escaped."

He laughed a little, and for a moment longer rested against her, then, with a little shake of his shoulders, he moved towards the study door, and Evelyn followed him. Richard was in a big chair before the fire, a book open on his knee, but he was not reading ; as he caught sight of them he started and looked up, obviously roused out of deep thought. Evelyn heard Gifford catch his breath as he saw him ; then she went forward and spoke cheerily.

"Would you like me to play to you ? I don't believe we've had any music since you came."

For a brief moment Richard's eyes lit up with their old smile.

"Please," he said. "Play me some Schumann—the Fantasia, and the Brahms Sonata—the first one. I'm coming to the drawing-room." He rose and followed her into the drawing-room, and dropped into a big chair near the piano, and Gifford followed his example, and prepared to give his brain a rest from the problems that were vexing it.

Nancy had gone to the schoolroom to finish her lessons, and was even now supposed to be working, but as she heard the distant sound of the piano, she rose, and setting the door wide, sat listening, forgetful of unlearned geography and Euclid.

Evelyn was playing the slow movement of the Brahms Sonata, and Nancy sat rigid, her head lifted, her eyes dark and wide, her lips parted, every nerve strained to catch the notes she loved, and presently she could bear it no longer, but leaving the lessons to do themselves, she went to the hall, and, sitting down outside the drawing-room door, listened to her heart's content.

An hour later, when Richard came out of the room with Gifford and Hugh to go to the study for a smoke, he stopped and smiled, for Nancy was curled up in a big chair just outside the door, fast asleep.

"She's been listening to the music, I suppose," Gifford remarked, and touched her arm. "Wake up, Nancy."

She started up in perplexity; then, realizing what had happened, flushed, for Gifford looked distinctly annoyed.

"I was listening to Evelyn," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's long past your bedtime. Go at once," he said. "Why didn't you come into the drawing-room instead of staying out here? Your hands are like ice."

Nancy murmured something which Gifford failed to catch, and he, worried and all on edge, spoke more sharply than he knew.

"If you have anything to say, say it properly. I will not have muttering," he said. "Did you hear me?"

Nancy's sensitive lips set; her eyes darkened sullenly.

"Yes," she said.

"Very well, then. Remember it in the future. Now go to bed."

Without a word she was turning away, when he spoke curtly:

"It is usual to say good-night, Nancy."

She turned back, and held out a cold hand first to Gifford, then to Richard.

"Good-night, Gifford. Good-night, Mr. Cavanagh. Good-night, Hugh."

Richard's stern face softened, and he held the child's fingers closely for a moment.

"Good-night, Nancy," he said, and he felt a sudden tremor run through the child's frame. She lifted her eyes to his for a second in a look he did not understand, then turned away and ran upstairs.

As they went into the study, Hugh spoke rather ill-advisedly.

"What a bear with a sore head you are, Gifford! You pitched into the poor little thing most brutally! What the dickens was there awful in her having gone to sleep there, instead of in bed?"

Gifford shrugged his shoulders, and Hugh flushed, but stood his ground.

"Hang it all! If you are in a bad temper, you needn't vent your irritation on a child!" he cried.

With a sudden movement Gifford swung round and faced him.

"When I require your advice as to my treatment of Nancy, or your comments on my personal behaviour, I will tell you," he said. "Till then, be kind enough to keep your opinions to yourself."

Hugh's eyes flashed and his hands clenched for the moment. Richard, watching him, thought his temper would master him, and he knew in the present state of things that any further recrimination between the brothers would lead to a violent quarrel.

"Oh, shut up, Hugh!" he said, and laid his hand on Hugh's arm with a gesture that took all offence from his words. "Don't be an ass, old chap!"

The touch, more than the words, coming from the man he adored, quieted Hugh in a moment, and he flashed a smile at him; then, selecting a pipe, began to clean it out, while Gifford, quite conscious that Hugh's last words were true, smoked savagely through a cigarette, then threw the stump in the fire, and without a word went out of the room.

As the door banged behind him, Hugh threw down the pipe and stretched lazily.

"Good heavens! what's the matter with him?" he

exclaimed. "He's in a filthy temper—and what about, Heaven only knows! I don't!"

Richard made no answer; he saw Hugh wanted to explode his grievance, so let him go on.

"You never know how to take him," he went on. "Sometimes he's all right, and then for no apparent reason he snaps everyone's head off, bullies Nancy, and upsets the whole house. Whatever was the harm in going to sleep there? It's absurd! He seems to think he can treat everyone anyhow except Evelyn. I will say he's generally decent to Evelyn. He'd better be!"

Richard nodded. Sublimely unconscious that he was the chief cause, he, too had wondered at Gifford's irritable temper.

"Oh, he's tired!" he said. "Very likely he's had a bad day. You must make allowances for the strain of his work."

"That's no reason why he should be so damned disagreeable!" Hugh growled. "He makes the house unbearable. Where's he gone now?"

"I don't know. To talk to your sister, perhaps."

"Very likely. To complain of my behaviour, I suppose! Oh, damn!"

"Why, Hughie?"

Evelyn's voice startled them both, and Hugh, overcoming his irritation, jumped up and laughed.

"Oh, everything—and nothing!" he said. "Come and sit down here, there's a darling, then I can sit on the floor and put my head on your knee. That's lovely! What a comfortable person you are!"

He settled himself luxuriously on the rug, burrowing his head against her knee, and though her words were for him, her smile was for Richard.

"You lazy infant! Do you imagine I want to sit here just to make a comfortable resting-place for you?"

Twisting round, he looked up at her, suddenly serious.

"Yes," he said, and all the love he felt for her vibrated in his voice. "I know it! Just that!"

Evelyn's hand was rested against his cheek, and, turning his head, he kissed it.

"You darling!" he said very softly; and a sudden delicate rose flooded her face.

"Don't be a dear old stupid," she said; but her fingers gave his a quick pressure, belying her words, and then she turned to Richard.

"Isn't he horribly sentimental?" she remarked. "Do you think it's the result of politics, or——"

She broke off abruptly, for over Richard's face came a look she had never seen before, at once desperate and fierce, the look of a man tortured almost beyond endurance. For a moment their eyes met; then she averted hers quickly, for she felt that in some way she had seen what was not meant for her eyes, and a minute later Diana entered and the conversation became more general.

Through the sleepless hours which followed Evelyn lay motionless, gazing at the grey square of the window outlined against the blackness of the wall, with the memory of that momentary betrayal constantly before her eyes, and the knowledge that Gifford's words were only too true torturing her weary brain. Richard was breaking his heart. His pride was too great for him to let his suffering be seen, and his will too powerful to allow him to be anything but very hard on himself, yet nevertheless under that icy self-restraint, that impassive exterior, there raged a very tempest of pain and suffering and bitterness, that was wearing him to pieces. Remembering all she had seen, she determined to make one last effort to help him, even against his will, to urge him to tell her of all that had happened, to force him, for his own safety, to break down the barrier he had erected between himself and her.

As it happened, the opportunity she sought came the following afternoon, for Diana, Nancy, and Hugh were out for a walk. Richard had declined to go out, and when Evelyn entered the drawing-room, she found him lounging before the fire.

He glanced up as she entered, but did not speak, and she drew another chair nearer the fire and established herself comfortably.

"I am so glad you did not go out," she said, taking her courage in both hands, as it were; whereupon Richard threw his cigarette in the fire, and pushed his chair a little farther back into the shadow.

"Why?" he said.

Evelyn's answer came clear and steady.

"Because I wanted to talk to you," she said.

He smiled disconcertingly.

"That is very charming of you," he said; but, with a gesture of impatience, she cut him short.

"No, please—not that way!" she said. "I am in earnest. I want to ask you something, and it is this: There is something that is troubling you. I know it. I can see it. Will you not tell me what it is? What is it?"

He started, then spoke curtly.

"What do you mean? I'm afraid, as I said this afternoon, you are apt to let your imagination run away with you."

"Just that something is very wrong. Something more than even Gifford knows."

He drew his breath hard, then lifted his head with the gesture she knew so well.

"What should be the matter? You do not expect me to rejoice at the way my life has turned out, do you? You do not want me to say I am pleased at the disgrace that has fallen upon me?"

Evelyn did not look at him, but gazed into the fire, and he went on, with the bitterness rising in his voice.

"Are you going to say that it is my own doing? That as I have sown, so shall I reap? Because if so, it's rather useless. I know it all so much better than you possibly can, and by experience—which is always more invaluable than precept!"

He laughed shortly, and lit another cigarette. "You see, I have not been through the mill in vain, since I have learnt that lesson," he added, and the bitter scorn in his voice jarred Evelyn; but she answered him quietly enough.

"I had not the least intention of uttering such a platitude. You see, I give you credit for knowing it without any repetition."

"Ah! Then what were you going to say?"

She raised her head and looked directly at him, knowing that now she must go through with the task she had set herself.

"Just to remind you that we are friends, and a friend does not like to be kept wholly in the dark. Have you forgotten that friendship?"

He caught his breath sharply.

"I don't understand," he said. "In what way have I kept you in the dark?"

Evelyn needed all her determination at that moment, for Richard's manner was not by any means encouraging; but Gifford's words rang in her memory, and she knew they were true. "I can't bear to see him—he is just breaking his heart."

At her momentary hesitation, he spoke again, and more imperatively.

"Please tell me. I do not understand."

His very irritability showed his state of mind, and she hastened to answer him.

"Just this," she said: "When you went away, three years ago, we were friends, in the truest, most intimate sense of the word; and that friendship meant a great deal to me, and I thought to you also. Up to a certain time that friendship lived; you wrote when you had time, and the distance between us was bridged. Quite suddenly you left off writing, and for months sent me no line or message. I did not even know whether you were living or dead. Then I heard you were in England, and coming here, and I thought to myself, 'Now I shall hear the reason of that silence; now we shall take up our friendship again;' but I was wrong, for you have come back a stranger. You have never given me any sign that you even remembered our compact . . . and there was one. Do you remember it, Richard? That last day when you said good-bye to me?"

She paused a moment, but he made no comment, and she went on.

"You have avoided me since you came. You have been utterly unlike yourself. You have resented my very existence, I think. I do not want to force your confidence, but somehow I cannot believe this is anything but a mask to your real feeling. Richard"—her voice trembled a little despite herself—"Richard . . . if in your heart of hearts, you wish our friendship to end, if you care nothing for it, tell me so now, and I shall understand; but if not, then, I beg of you, tell me why you have treated me like this."

There was a moment's silence, broken by the song of a black-bird perched just outside the window. Then Richard turned suddenly in his chair and faced her, his face white and set.

"Do you realize what you're saying?" he said violently. "Do you realize that you are speaking to a man whose name is stained, disgraced, execrated? Do you understand why I'm here at all? Why I've been kicked out of India? That I've been sent home because it's believed that I am an adulterer—a murderer?"

In spite of herself, Evelyn winced, and he saw it, and went on speaking more rapidly as his bitterness and misery got the better of him.

"The time is past for cloaking disagreeable things with pleasant names. As you have chosen to ask me in a manner that makes it impossible to refuse to explain my conduct, you must not mind if the explanation is objectionable. The truth about things is seldom very pleasant, and this is no exception. I've come home with that suspicion attached to my name, a man who's been let down lightly because he'd done good work. . . . The Indian Council are sorry for me—they pity me for making such a mess of things; and, as I told your brother, they couldn't do much to me out there because of the exaggerated notions the Hill tribes hold about me. . . . So they sent me home . . . kicked me out quietly . . . broke me, in as decent a way as they could, but broke me all the same. . . . And now some damned outsider has stirred up the fuss the Council tried to avoid. . . . I can't deny it . . . you know that . . . and you only . . . and you know why . . . and just how great a fool I've been!"

He paused a moment, breathing hard. Now that the flood-gates of his bitterness and indignation were open at last, his rage threatened to overwhelm him in its violence; there was something almost barbaric in his wrath. But he made a fierce effort to control himself as he went on.

"Of course, there's only one other who knew the truth, and that one has done this. It's her revenge . . . because I refused her . . . what she wanted. It's ridiculous to think what a fool I was, isn't it? How she must have laughed in her sleeve at me! Now you know what sort of a man you gave your friendship to, and understand, perhaps, why I've changed . . . why I don't trust any woman on God's earth. . . . There's your answer! . . ."

He broke off, fighting blindly, fiercely, to check the storm of agony that choked his throat with aching tears, furious that she should see his weakness, and for one moment Evelyn thought she had won; then, with an effort that wrenched his every nerve and muscle, his iron will conquered, and he had himself once more in hand.

Evelyn saw his jaw harden, his mouth set, and knew she had made her appeal in vain; and it did not need his words to tell her she had failed.

"My language has been unpardonable, I'm afraid," he said courteously. "Please forgive me, if you can. It is rather a difficult subject to talk about politely, and I'm afraid I've not been polite."

Evelyn turned from the fire, and crossing the room, sat down near one of the windows. She felt extraordinarily tired, as if she did not care to talk any more, even to him. He saw the weariness in her face, and uttered an impatient exclamation.

"I've tired you," he said. "How abominably selfish of me."

She looked up with an odd little smile, and shook her head.

"No, no!" she said; "I assure you I am perfectly well, and your talk—interested me. Don't reproach yourself. Would you be kind enough to ring the bell? Thank you. If you are to catch the five-five, we should have tea in at once."

Gifford came in just as the maid appeared, and in a few minutes Diana, Hugh, and Nancy entered from their walk.

Hugh talked as much and as fast as usual; so Evelyn's almost total silence passed unnoticed; and immediately after tea the dogcart came round to take Richard and Gifford to the station.

While Richard was upstairs, Evelyn's thoughts flew back to that parting three years ago, so unlike to-day's; and when he came down, ready to start, she wondered if he, too, remembered; and even as she did so, the colour flamed suddenly over throat and brow, for there was another memory linked with that of the parting, a memory more precious to her than anything else in all the world—the touch of his lips on hers.

Although she did not guess it, Richard, too, was thinking of that other parting as he entered the drawing-room, and for a moment a mad desire wellnigh overmastered him to feel her lips once more on his; but no hint of it was visible in his words of farewell.

"It's been very good of you to have me," he said, with the courteous formality that hurt her so. "I shall see you again before long, I hope. Good-bye!"

They shook hands; Evelyn murmured some polite acknowledgment of his words, and he went out to the waiting dogcart, got up beside Gifford, and drove away. Evelyn went back into the house, careless of the beauty of the spring afternoon, feeling suddenly extraordinarily tired; and, sitting down, she took up a book, just to save herself the exertion of talking.

Diana and Hugh went to church, and Nancy ensconced herself in a window-seat with a book, which she presently put down.

"Evelyn, I want to ask you something."

Evelyn started a little at the sudden remark, and a sharp, stabbing pain went through her temples.

"Well, dear?"

"It's about Mr. Cavanagh," Nancy said, and, leaving the window, came over to sit near her sister. "Evelyn, he's so different . . . he's just like another person . . . except up till the very last moment. Why is it?"

Evelyn was conscious that she wished Nancy had chosen any other subject for conversation, but she did not wish the child to see her reluctance to talk of Richard, so answered readily enough.

"He has been through a great deal in these three years—enough to have changed any man. People have said many wickedly untrue things about him, and he is not able to prove them false."

Nancy nodded.

"Yes, I know," she said. "They said he was Mrs. Leighton's lover, didn't they? And that was why, when Mr. Leighton was killed at Kultänn, it was so bad for him, wasn't it?"

She raised innocent eyes to her sister's, and at Evelyn's horrified question, "Nancy, where did you hear that?" shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know; I forget. Partly at the Hodge's garden-party—Miss Brabazon and Tom Hodges were talking, and I heard them. I told Gifford. And then I read what the *Daily Mail* said one morning. Of course, I didn't mention it to anyone else, so it doesn't matter my knowing. I'm fourteen, you know, Evelyn! Oh! and I forgot: one of the girls—I think it was Sibyl Courtneidge—had the *Planet*, that wrote all that wicked rubbish about him. I think it's absurd to make all this fuss. Everyone knows he wouldn't ever do things like that!"

For a moment Evelyn was too astounded to make any answer. Nancy had spoken in such a matter-of-fact way that she felt completely nonplussed, and before she had made up her mind what to say, Nancy went on:

"But I can't understand why he's so funny over it. He's so stern and—and cold—you know—and he didn't seem a bit glad to come. People are dreadfully disappointing, don't you think? They always seem to do so differently to what you expect. When will he come again? I suppose you don't

know. Evelyn, how quiet you are! Is your head aching again?"

"It is—a little," Evelyn was forced to admit; and instantly Nancy jumped up, and, placing cushions comfortably on the sofa, insisted on her lying down, and, after shading the light from her eyes, went back to a book, and, to Evelyn's relief, talked no more.

At dinner Evelyn found herself reluctant to eat, and soon afterwards excused herself and went to bed, leaving Hugh and Diana alone, whereupon the latter frowned desperately, too worried to be an interesting companion.

That night passed drearily enough for Evelyn; she could not sleep much, and when she did it was to dream so hideously that it was a relief to awaken; also, the pain in her head grew steadily worse, and by the morning she felt exceedingly ill, and did not get up. Hugh went up to town by an early train, concerned at his sister's indisposition, and Diana was left alone with the children, to persuade Evelyn, if she were not better on the morrow, to call in a doctor.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was just nine o'clock, and on this beautiful April morning, with London looking its best, Richard could not but enjoy his morning ride, though, like Hugh, he longed to get Shireen away from the trammels of the Park and gallop him across country.

The Row was filling as Richard turned his horse at the end of the Ladies' Mile, and trotted towards Hyde Park Corner, not particularly caring to be the cynosure of all eyes, and far too dogged to avoid it by not riding in the Park at all.

His interview with Macintyre had been put off, after all, owing to the old man's indisposition, and up to this Thursday morning he had heard nothing further from the Foreign Office—much to his vexation, for he knew the information he could place at its service was valuable in the extreme. However, it seemed his information was to be ignored, and the result of his six months' self-banishment beyond the Frontier vain. Despite his present position, he could not cease to take an

interest in the country he loved, and the indifference of the Home authorities in the face of its present very real danger maddened him.

The thought of it came back with redoubled vigour as he caught sight of Lady Macintyre cantering towards him, and he urged Shireen to a faster trot, not desirous of having to exchange greetings. Lady Macintyre, however, had stopped to speak to an acquaintance before he passed her, and only bowed, while her companion stared Richard up and down with scarcely veiled insolence, and cut him markedly.

A spark glimmered in his grey eyes, and his grip on the reins tightened involuntarily. These miserable stay-at-home luxurious puppies, what right had they to criticize men like himself? He rode on with compressed lips and lowering brows till, just as he was about to cross Park Lane, an interruption occurred in the shape of a fire-engine, tearing madly down the road, bell clanging, hoofs thundering, early traffic scattering right and left; whereupon Shireen, whose nerves had already been tried by the blue fumes of a motor-bus, and whose limbs ached for a gallop such as she loved, reared, plunged, and wheeled on to the pavement. Two or three pedestrians stopped to watch the scene, and some riders in the Park pulled up, and Richard became the centre of attraction.

Sir George Duncombe, on his way to the Park, saw little groups of people watching something as he turned out of Great Stanhope Street, and the next moment caught sight of a rearing, plunging horse, with coal-black coat glistening in the sunlight, and in the saddle a man sitting erect and still, absolutely careless of the sensation he was creating, and only intent on soothing his terrified animal.

A young Guardsman nodded to Sir George, and moved to his side.

"Mornin'! By Jove, what a seat!" he said enviously. "Ever see a chap as cool as that before? Why, it's Cavanagh, isn't it? The man there's all this fuss about."

"Yes," Sir George answered curtly, his eyes under their frowning brows intent on Richard; and his companion nodded.

"Thought so. Well, the beggar can ride, anyway. And what a mount! Gad! I wonder where he got her? No European breed that. Jove! he's off! No, he isn't! Good Lord, the man's a marvel!"

His enthusiasm was so genuine that Sir George unbent a little.

"Yes, it's worth seeing. I believe he brought the animal home with him. Ah! That's better!"

Shireen was beginning to quiet down under the magnetism of her rider's voice and touch, and after wheeling once or twice in an erratic circle, she consented to behave herself once more, giving her rider time to see the admiring crowds, both inside the Park and out, that were watching him. He scowled at the sight, and Sir George, pushing through the throng, rode up to him.

"Hullo, old chap!" he said. "My congratulations. What a superb brute!"

The scowl left Richard's brow at the sight of Sir George's cheery face, and he smiled.

"Isn't she fine?" he said. "I didn't see you in the Park."

"For the good reason that I wasn't there! You are looking fitter this morning. Pangley do you good?"

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose so. By the way, what's become of Gifford? I went round to see him last night, but he was out of town."

The cheeriness departed from Sir George's face, and his voice changed.

"Haven't you heard?" he said gravely. "I thought you'd be sure to know."

"Know what?" Richard asked sharply. "What's happened?"

"Miss Chetwynde is ill, and he was sent for yesterday morning."

"Miss Chetwynde? Evelyn?"

"Yes. I don't know what it is, but it's serious."

Richard stared at him, his face whitening under its tan.

"Evelyn ill!" he repeated half under his breath. "But that's nonsense! It can't be! I saw her on Sunday!"

"I assure you it is unfortunately true," Sir George answered, and, watching him narrowly, saw his teeth clench and his whole face harden as though to fight some sudden emotion. He reined up.

"You're dining with us to-night, aren't you?" he said. "Cecile's full of some scheme or other that she wants to talk over with you."

"Yes," Richard answered curtly, and rode on, trying to make himself believe what he had just heard.

In the hall of his brother's house he met Hugh, and the

sight of his face drove the truth home with a shock of horror. The boy stopped and caught Richard's arm.

"Have you heard?" he said hoarsely. "Evelyn . . . she's ill . . . in danger. . . ."

"I have just heard," Richard replied.

"I knew nothing about it . . . here is the telegraph-boy. Perhaps you will hear."

He was conscious himself of no very defined feeling for the moment, save that of sympathy for the boy, who snatched the wire from the footman's hands and tore it open with shaking fingers.

Richard saw his lips whiten, and, going forward, unceremoniously took the telegram from him. Its message was very brief, sent in Gifford's name :

"No change."

Without a word Richard turned away and went to the library, which he knew would be deserted at this hour. One desire, and one only, obtruded its presence—that of solitude. He must be alone, and, closing the door behind him, he walked to the window, and stood gazing unseeingly at the opposite houses.

Evelyn was ill, in danger ; perhaps even at this moment she was dying. Dying !

Richard repeated the word aloud, trying to realize the sense of it, wondering what this curious sense of detachment meant. He was not conscious of any sensation ; all his powers of feeling seemed numbed, as if his nerves were deadened by some opiate.

Mechanically he straightened a fold of the curtain that displeased his eye, flicked some dust from his boot with his riding-switch, crossed the room to get a cigarette, and then, in the act of selecting one from the box, paused suddenly as if some power had arrested all movement.

On the little table where the cigarette box lay was a bowl filled with violets, and their fragrant, earthy scent filled the air all around, and brought back to Richard's mind an incident all unnoticed at the time—the memory of Evelyn lifting a bowl of the same flowers, and laying her cheek against the dark velvet of their petals, as she bid him good-night little more than a week ago.

He could see her so vividly that it seemed as if she must be standing before him now, with the white folds of her dress clinging round her, and the burnished gold of her hair against

the purple of the flowers . . . the numbness passed suddenly, pierced by an agony so keen that it wrung his very soul.

In the moment that followed that swift pang, two memories burned themselves as it were in fire on his brain ; the one of Evelyn, as he had seen her on that last morning three years ago, with the red chrysanthemums in her hands and the branches of the plane-trees arching above her head—Evelyn, in all her gracious beauty of face, and form, and soul ; the other, in sharp contrast, a stretch of arid, tortured land, with blue-black clouds lowering overhead, and a newly dug grave at his feet.

“ Richard ! Richard ! Richard ! ”

Surely he could hear her voice even now, the voice that had spoken to him across measureless distance in that time of awful sights and sounds, that he had heard so lately pleading with him not to shut her out from his suffering.

Not to shut her out ! Oh God, and he had done it, striking even at her, in his bitter rebellion against Fate ; and now she was beyond his reach, beyond his remorse, where words, and tears, and love alike were powerless.

He turned blindly from the table, shuddering at the scent of the violets, conscious only of his anguish and his despair. Evelyn was dying, and too late he knew how he loved her.

Betty met him in the hall and spoke, then, seeing his face, drew back.

“ What is it ? ” she breathed. “ Uncle Richard, what is it ? ”

He looked at her with eyes profoundly desolate.

“ My punishment,” he said tonelessly, and, passing her, went on upstairs to his room, leaving her gazing after him, not daring to follow, yet trembling at his words.

Dying . . . dying . . . the word beat on his brain and hammered in his ears as he entered his room ; and his man, who came in answer to his ring, hardly controlled a start—well-trained servant as he was—at the sight of his master’s face.

“ Find out the next train to Pangley,” Richard said briefly, “ and pack my portmanteau. I may want it for two or three days. I shan’t want you. Be quick.”

The next train was twelve-forty, two hours ahead, and he cursed the delay, and went to find his brother. Frank was out, however, and Lady Hilda did not expect him in to

luncheon. She, too, saw something was very wrong, but, unlike her daughter, did not ask the reason.

Richard walked to the window, and stood gazing out into the leafy vista of the square.

"I am going away for a day or two," he said. "Will you explain to Frank?"

"Yes. Do you wish your letters to be forwarded?"

"Yes—no; I'll leave my address at the club."

"Very well. Ah, there you are, Betty! Have you decided whether you will come with me this afternoon?"

Betty had started on seeing her uncle, but answered her mother in the affirmative, and then sat down near the fire, and Lady Hilda, all unconsciously, chose to speak of the one subject she should have avoided.

"This is very sad news about Miss Chetwynde," she said, "and so sudden too. You were down there on Sunday, were you not, Richard? Was she ill then?"

Richard did not turn from the window, but answered briefly:

"I don't think so."

"What is the matter, mother?" Betty asked, and Lady Hilda shook her head.

"I don't know at all. Something very serious, I am afraid, judging by Mr. Chetwynde's anxiety."

"I am most frightfully sorry," Betty exclaimed. "I wonder what can be wrong? Pneumonia perhaps? That's very swift. It is dreadfully sad, though."

Richard felt suddenly that he could bear no more. It was impossible to stand by, hearing such remarks and giving no sign of what they meant to him, and without a word he turned and went out of the room.

Nearly two hours before he could start. Two hours to fill up—two hours during which he could do nothing to help her, in which she might die. He tried to pray, but found himself incapable of any words, almost of any coherent thought, and presently rose from his knees with the calm of a great despair written upon his face. During these last awful months he had deliberately shut out God from his life; now in his desperate need God would not hear him. It was just.

A knock roused him, and, crossing the room, he unlocked the door. A footman stood without.

"Sir Henry Macintyre is waiting to speak to you, sir, on the telephone."

"Tell him I am coming," Richard answered, and the man departed.

Just for a moment Richard waited, bringing his thoughts with an effort to the matter in hand, then followed Charles to the telephone.

Macintyre's voice was non-committal, but his words were urgent.

"Is that you, Cavanagh? I want to see you—this morning. Come round at once."

Eleven! Richard glanced at his watch.

"I'm afraid I can't. I'm going out of town."

The voice came back, with a touch of peremptoriness in its amazement.

"*Can't?* That's nonsense. You must. It is urgent."

Richard hesitated before replying, and the voice grew sharper.

"Private arrangements must give way in this instance, Cavanagh. I shall expect you."

He rang off without waiting for any further answer, leaving Richard with the receiver still in his hand, and the despair deepening in his eyes. A minute later he went out into the hall, and gave a telegraph-form to Charles, with the order to send it at once, then set out to walk to the Foreign Office, too much on edge to be able to bear the inaction of driving.

He was ushered upstairs straight into the Secretary's room, and found himself face to face with Macintyre, grown old and bent in these last three years, yet hawk-eyed as ever. Richard took the chair he was meant to take, where the light from the window on Macintyre's left fell on his face, and the old man sat silent for a moment, scrutinizing his visitor.

Richard was not looking at him, but at the well-remembered view across St. James's Park, more charming even than usual on this lovely April day, his head lifted with a touch of his old independence, his lips set, his face inscrutable, and Macintyre, well versed in the judgment of men, noticed the deep lines round the mouth and eyes, the hardness of the expression, the silvered hair on the temples, the bitterness and despair underlying the surface coldness of the eyes.

This was the face of a man who had taken life hardly, a man who had suffered, who was suffering still, with an intensity of passion only controlled by his inflexible will and immense pride.

After his short scrutiny, the old man turned to the

business at hand, tapping a letter which lay before him on the table.

"I have considered your letter of the second very carefully, Mr. Cavanagh, and on Monday I laid it before the Council. At present I wish to ask you a few questions. Be good enough to answer me as precisely as your memory allows."

Richard's eyes left the vista of park and came to the keen ones watching him. He bowed, and Macintyre leant back in his chair.

"You left Kultänn on the twenty-sixth of December last, Mr. Cavanagh. You then proceeded to cross the Border with an idea of travelling through Afghanistan. I am right, am I not?"

Richard bent his head briefly.

"Quite right."

"You got to Kabul, I believe?"

"Yes."

"You then left for the North? Your idea was——?"

"To get through to Tashkend."

"You changed your mind and stayed. Why?"

"I had already obtained certain information which led me to believe that my presence would be undesirable in Kabul."

"You therefore stayed there?"

"Yes."

"And while there you obtained further information?"

"Yes. That which I told you in my letter."

The old man paused a moment, tapping the table gently with his finger-tips, and Richard waited, his stern set face turned a little towards the window. At last Macintyre spoke.

"What first gave you an inkling of this matter, Mr. Cavanagh?" he said. "I take it I am right in supposing that it was not entirely unsuspected by you?"

Richard turned to him at once, meeting his eyes steadily.

"Quite right," he said; "although it was only a suspicion on my part, not a certainty. Certain papers fell into my hands, and, although at the time I could not make head or tail of them, they turned out to have a bearing upon this matter."

"That was some time ago. Do you remember exactly when?"

"Exactly. It was Christmas night, 1903. The Christmas after my leave expired."

"May I ask how this information came to your hand?" Sir Henry inquired.

"Certainly," Richard answered, and gave him a brief résumé of the doings of that Christmas evening, when he had so nearly lost his life on the lonely hillside, with the black, rainy darkness before his eyes, and those strange, far-off cries from the Hills echoing in his ears.

When he ended, Macintyre made no comment, but continued his catechism.

"You were personally aware of the negotiations between the Maharajah of Belchin and General Gerrolstein?"

"Yes."

"Your disguise was not penetrated?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"You have proof of this?"

Richard unbuttoned his waistcoat, and drew a little packet from beneath his vest. Without a word, he handed it across to Macintyre, who screwed an eyeglass into his eye, and began to study the contents. For a few moments he did not move, then, suddenly dropping the glass, he leant forward, a curious suppressed excitement in his voice.

"How did you get this?"

A very faint smile curled Richard's lips.

"I took the liberty of—borrowing it—from the General's aide-de-camp."

"And then——"

"Then I made south for Herat."

"Alone?"

"Yes, I preferred to run no risk."

"You travelled to Merv with this on you? Unsuspected, unrobbed?"

"Yes."

"How long did it take you?"

"Nearly five months."

The old man drew a long breath, and leant back in his chair, staring. It was an amazing thing this man had done—amazing, incredulous! And this was the man who had been removed from his post because scandal of the gravest sort had been rife, because ugly rumours had become woven around his name.

Macintyre's eyes narrowed. He glanced a moment at the paper, and spoke half to himself.

"Why did you do this, Mr. Cavanagh?"

With slightest suggestion of a shrug, Richard answered at once.

"For want of something better."

"It did not occur to you, in view of your changed position, to follow any other course?"

A glint, like that of a drawn sword, came into Richard's eyes, and his lips whitened; but Macintyre went on:

"It did not occur to you, perhaps, that the General's Government might be willing to sacrifice a good deal to keep this"—he tapped the paper—"out of English hands."

With a sudden movement Richard rose to his feet, his nostrils dilating, his breath coming hard.

"I have given you all the information I have to give," he said. "I will wish you good-morning, Sir Henry."

The old man nodded, and under his shaggy white brows his eyes twinkled.

"Quite so. Sit down, Mr. Cavanagh. I have not quite done."

But Richard remained standing, white and rigid, and Macintyre smiled, and spoke with sudden heartiness.

"Don't be a fool, Cavanagh. Do you imagine that I expected you to have considered such an idea?"

Richard's hard-set lips curled.

"I might remind you, since you seem to forget it, Sir Henry," he said, "that there are certain things which even I do not do. Possibly it is hard for you to believe it. Your suggestion is unpardonable."

He bowed slightly, and was going towards the door, when Macintyre spoke his name. His courtesy made him turn, to see the old man on his feet with hand outstretched.

"I ask your pardon, Mr. Cavanagh," he said. "You are quite right . . . but you must remember that we are dealing with harsh facts in a very harsh world, and your position is a peculiar one. Come, now"—his voice grew peremptory—"let us get more closely to this business."

Richard resumed his seat, furiously angry, yet unable to refuse such a frank apology, and the Secretary, leaving all trace of the personal note, plunged into the extraordinary business on hand.

At two o'clock he rose, and dismissed the subject.

"I will telephone you early to-morrow," he said. "The Cabinet will meet to-night. I am afraid your country engagement must be cancelled. Will you give me the pleasure of your company at luncheon?"

A change passed over Richard's face, not unremarked by the shrewd old statesman. He caught his breath.

"I cannot," he said. "I am sorry—it is impossible."

Sir Henry looked at him keenly.

"I lunch at two, and it is that time already," he said.

"Surely you will not refuse?"

"I must. I am expecting a telegram."

"Of great importance?"

Richard's lips contracted suddenly.

"Yes," he said, a little hoarsely.

Sir Henry nodded.

"Very well, then. I hope it is good news. You will remain in town? I may want you at any moment after to-night."

The despair Sir Henry's keen eyes had read in Richard's face deepened, but he answered without hesitation.

"Yes," he said. "After nine to-night I will remain in town," and with that the old man had to perforce be content; but when Richard had gone and he was alone in the room, he stood for a time staring into the fire, regardless of his waiting meal, and spoke half aloud to himself.

"A fine nature . . . a fine nature. . . . He'll come through all right . . . but it has hit him very hard!"

At Berkeley Square the telegram was waiting, and Richard tore it open and read the brief message.

"No improvement. Condition extremely critical.—
GIFFORD CHETWYNDE."

No hint to him to come, no explanation, no word of hope—and he had promised to stay in town. . . . He was powerless—he could not even be by her side.

Just after luncheon Lady Duncombe rang him up on the telephone.

"I am going down to Pangley to fetch Nancy. Shall I call for you?"

And ten minutes later the big red limousine drew up at Lady Hilda's house, and Richard, who had been waiting, got hastily in.

Cecile greeted him, her pretty face pale and troubled.

"Oh, Richard, I just must go!" she said. "They won't let me see her, of course, but at least we can make Gifford tell us the truth. Telegrams are worse than nothing. . . .

And poor little Nancy! I am going to bring her back with me; it's not fit for her to be there."

She broke off, but Richard did not answer at all, and all the thirty-five miles he hardly spoke, till, as they neared Pangley, Cecile's emotion proved too much for her.

"I know she'll die!" she exclaimed, the tears trickling on to her fur coat. "She is too sweet and good to do anything else; . . . and it is too dreadful . . . too cruel.

. . . Why should she be taken away when we all love her so? Oh, I didn't mean to cry . . . but I just . . . can't . . . help it!"

She gave a little sniff, put her pretty head against her big muff, and sobbed pitifully; and Richard gazed at her helplessly, unable to say anything comforting.

After a minute or two, however, she sat up and dried her eyes resolutely.

"I won't!" she said; "I really won't! Evelyn would just hate me to be such an idiot. Besides, Gifford is there . . . and he's so clever. Tell me, don't you think it's a wise idea to fetch Nancy? The child is so highly strung that if she's left alone she will fret herself into an illness. She adores Evelyn so!"

Richard nodded.

"An excellent plan. You are quite right."

Cecile looked at him curiously, and would have commented on his apparent indifference, but that at that moment the car drew up outside the gates of the Chase.

I told Barker not to pull up at the door, in case the noise of the car should disturb her," she explained as they walked up the drive. "Good-afternoon, Mary. We have called to ask after your mistress. Please tell Dr. Chetwynde we are here."

Mary ushered them into the drawing-room, which was full of spring sunshine, and Lady Duncombe sat down, with a strained look on her face, careless of Richard, who walked across to the open window and stood gazing out unseeingly into the garden, fighting the agony of remembrance that surged through him. Less than a week ago in this very room she had seen and spoken with him. A gracious opportunity had been offered him, and he had cast it deliberately away. In his pride and bitterness he had spurned the most priceless gift God had offered him . . . and such gifts are not offered twice. All his agony and remorse would not bring back that last hour, and upstairs the woman he loved lay dying.

Gifford's entrance roused him, and he turned round, no trace of his suffering in his stern set face; and Lady Duncombe rose and put her hands in Gifford's.

"Oh, how is she?" she exclaimed. "I couldn't bear telegrams! I had to know more, Gifford. . . . Tell us the truth . . . we must know!"

Gifford glanced from one to the other, shook hands with Richard, and dropped into a chair. He looked worn and haggard, and very tired.

"No better," he said. "It was good of you to come, but there is nothing more to tell you. She is as ill as she can possibly be. I have wired for Sir Peter Huntingdon."

Richard did not speak, but Cecile echoed the great specialist's name under her breath.

"Sir Peter Huntingdon! Ah! . . . I mustn't see her?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Is she in pain?"

Gifford nodded, and Lady Duncombe refrained from further questioning.

"You will let us know at once if there is the slightest change?" she said. "And I want to ask a favour: I want to take Nancy back with me. It is not wise that she should be here . . . she will worry herself into a fever. The strain is so great."

Gifford rose, gratitude in his eyes.

"That's very kind of you," he said. "Yes, she shall come. I will fetch her."

He went out of the room, and Lady Duncombe turned to Richard and held out a shaking hand.

"He thinks the worst," she said. "Oh, Richard, help me not to cry . . . it will only upset him . . . and Nancy! . . ."

Richard took her hand in his and held it in his close grasp, quieting her by his strength, something of the tension of his own nerves relieved by the appeal for help.

It was about five minutes later that Gifford came back, followed by Nancy—Nancy with white face and eyes heavy with unshed tears and hours of sleepless fear. At the sight of her, Richard felt his heart contract, but he saw the strain of the child's self-control, and, not wishing to break it, only shook hands with her silently. Lady Duncombe put her arm round her.

"Gifford has told you, hasn't he, dear?" she said; and Nancy nodded.

"Yes. It is very kind of you . . . but I don't want to come. Please let me stay here . . . near . . . Evelyn."

Lady Duncombe looked helplessly at Gifford, and Nancy shivered a little. Gifford spoke, his great anxiety making him irritable.

"Do as you are told, Nancy. Go and get ready. I have told Ellen to pack what you require for to-night, and the rest can be sent on."

For a moment the child hesitated; then Evelyn's lifelong training of obedience conquered the rebellion, and she went out of the room.

Gifford offered Richard a cigarette, and lit one himself, snatching a brief rest from his vigil in the sick-room, while Lady Duncombe tried to talk about anything but the matter that engrossed them all.

"Don't forget you are dining with us to-night," she remarked to Richard. "And you might take Nancy riding to-morrow—or motor her somewhere."

"I'm afraid I can't go anywhere to-morrow," he replied levelly. "Macintyre may want me."

"Macintyre?"

Lady Duncombe echoed the name half doubtfully, and Gifford looked up sharply.

"Does that mean something important?" he asked. "You have seen him, then?"

"I saw him this morning—yes. No; I can't tell at present, but I must hold myself in readiness for him to-morrow."

His other life—Macintyre, Kultänn, the information he had gained at the risk of his life—all seemed oddly unimportant just now by the side of the fact that overwhelmed him. Nothing mattered very much if Evelyn were dying, and in his heart of hearts he dared not hope for her life.

Nancy came back in a few moments, ready for the drive back to town, and Lady Duncombe prepared to depart. Gifford accompanied them to the gate and handed her into the car.

"I will wire you last thing to-night," he said. "Good-bye, and thank you! Good-bye, Nancy. Don't look like that!"

A sudden compunction seized him at the sight of her strained, unchildlike look, and he took her hand.

"Be brave!" he said, more gently than he usually spoke. "And remember Evelyn would rather you went."

He bent and kissed her, and gratitude flashed into the dark eyes. She squeezed his hand, and murmured :

"Yes, I will . . . I really will !" and as she climbed into the car, Richard turned to his friend, and for one instant his restraint weakened.

"Wire me directly Huntingdon comes," he said hoarsely, "and for God's sake tell me exactly what he says !"

Gifford's eyes met his in one quick direct look ; then he nodded and wrung his hand.

"I will do all in my power !" he said gently, and the next moment they were off.

It was a ghastly drive. Lady Duncombe tried at first to keep up some measure of conversation ; Richard answered in monosyllables, and Nancy stared in front of her and never opened her close-shut lips.

Just as he was bidding her farewell in Lady Duncombe's drawing-room, she caught the lapels of his coat and looked up in his face.

"Gifford told the truth, didn't he ? He will do all he can, won't he ? Mr. Cavanagh, he won't hide it if she gets worse ?"

Richard looked down into the child's agonized eyes, and his own softened.

"No, Nancy ; he will let me know at once," he said, "and I will tell you. You may trust me."

She set her teeth, fighting back the tears in her throat, and, conquering herself, leant back against the cushions with a weary little sigh.

"Oh, I'm so tired !" she said shakily. "I—I didn't sleep very well last night. Mr. Cavanagh, if you have a telegram to-night, will you telephone or send word to me ?"

"Yes, most certainly. And you must try to rest to-night. Remember, Gifford will do all he can."

She nodded.

"I know. Thank you. It is very kind of you not to mind."

Her studious politeness, her utter lack of the spontaneity and tempestuous affection that so characterized her nature, her formal replies and resolute ignoring of his special interest in either Evelyn or herself, perplexed Richard and hurt him a little. He loved the child more than he had guessed, and her passionate ardent nature had appealed to him strongly. He did not in the least realize how great a reason for the change was his own behaviour of a week back.

When he left, ten minutes later, she only gave him a cold little hand, murmured a farewell, and sank once more into her chair ; and Richard went away, wondering if grief for Evelyn alone swayed her behaviour.

Richard dined at South Audley Street, and, just as dinner was progressing, Betty telephoned to him to say that a telegram had come from Pangley, saying there was no change whatever in Evelyn's condition.

His host and hostess received the news in silence ; there was nothing to say ; and when dinner was over Richard went upstairs to tell Nancy.

The room was half lit by a street lamp, and by its uncertain light he saw her lying face downwards on the bed, her figure rigid, her hands flung clenched above her head. At his entrance, she started up wildly, and he made haste to speak.

"There is no change, Nancy. I have just heard."

She sank back again without a word, and he sat down on the edge of the bed, and put his arm round her.

"Don't look like that, kiddie," he said. "She will get better—she must !"

She drew away from his arm, and her dark eyes flashed stormily.

"You don't care !" she cried, with sudden passion. "If you cared, you would have been glad to come back, glad to see her again ; you wouldn't have been strange and hard, and—and shut us both out of everything."

He winced as the words stung him, and then rose to his feet.

"Very well, Nancy. If that is what you think, there is no more to be said. Good-night."

He went towards the door, but she called him back, her voice ringing sharply, the rare tears rising in her eyes.

"Mr. Cavanagh ! Mr. Cavanagh ! Oh, don't go !"

He turned at once at the imploring cry, and the next moment had her in his arms, and she was clinging to him desperately, her face hidden against his neck, her whole slender little body rigid one moment, shaken the next, by the storm of weeping.

He did not speak for a while, but held her closely, his cheek resting on her hair, the agony in his own heart making him very tender with the child. After a while she grew quieter, till she lay exhausted, her hands relaxing something of their desperate grip of him, yet still not releasing their hold. Then he spoke, and his voice was a little unsteady.

"Kiddie . . . kiddie, dear. It's all right. It *will* be all right. Try to be brave."

She groped for a handkerchief, so he gave her his, and presently she lifted her head.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," she said shakily. "But, oh . . . I have been brave. I have really . . . because you told me to, only I was so . . . so dreadfully tired. . . ."

She rubbed her eyes energetically, and pushed back her hair.

"I missed you so dreadfully," she said. "You weren't a bit the same . . . and Evelyn did, too, I think . . . and then she was ill, and you'd gone. She's been ill for a long time . . . I mean tired and not strong."

"Has she?" Richard's voice was hoarse. "Why?"

Nancy shook her head.

"I don't know. She was rather worried about you, I think . . . and sometimes she'd sit and just look *through* things . . . you know how I mean . . . not often, you know, only just once or twice."

He nodded, then bent his head and kissed her very gently.

"I must go downstairs, dear. You'll try to go to sleep, won't you? Kiss me, Nancy."

She kissed him eagerly, lovingly; then lay down as he straightened the tumbled clothes and turned the hot pillow.

"Yes. And oh . . . you'll come to-morrow, won't you?" she said. "You won't ever be different again, will you? Good-night . . . do you remember the time when you came back with Evelyn from Lady Duncombe's dinner-party, and I was watching for you? Say it again, like you did then: 'Good-night, kiddie dear. Sleep well.' I used to think of you every night all the three years you were away, and try to hear you say it."

He stood looking down at her a moment, thinking of the night of which she had spoken, of the moonlight on Evelyn's hair and white shoulders. Then he wrenched himself back to the present, and kissed the child once more.

"Good-night, kiddie dear. Sleep well," he said gently, and, opening the door, went out of the room.

At midday the following day came a brief message from Gifford: "Slight improvement," whereupon Richard telephoned at once to South Audley Street, and then, obeying an imperative message from Sir Henry Macintyre, went to the Foreign Office.

He was received by Sir Henry Macintyre, and took the same chair facing the window, noticing idly that the trees were fully out now, whereas at that last interview they had been but half broken. Sir Henry spoke at once of the reason of Richard's summons. The India Council wished to specially thank him for his most valuable information, which would be of great service to them. There were one or two points upon which further enlightenment was desired, and perhaps now would be the most fitting opportunity to obtain it.

Richard listened, with stern, impassive face, answered Macintyre's few direct questions as briefly and clearly as possible, and sat waiting for the old man's comment on the matter, wondering a little what it would be. He grew a trifle impatient at the prolonged silence, and turned his gaze from the green stretch of park, to meet Macintyre's piercing eyes. Even as their glances met, the old man rose and held out his hand.

"That matter, then, is settled," he said. "I do not think there is anything more to say. Now I must ask you to excuse me, Mr. Cavanagh, as I have someone waiting in the next room to see me. Good-morning!"

He shook hands, touched the bell by his side, and Richard found himself being shown out, conscious of a dull sense of disappointment; why, he hardly knew, for he realized now that the end had been inevitable. Had he been aware of the identity of the 'someone waiting in the next room,' his feelings would have been curiously different, and the courteous finality of his dismissal would have ceased to hurt him; but he did not know, and went on his way feeling that that chapter of his life was definitely closed, his work was a thing of the past, and that the India Council had done with him for good and all. The day was exceptionally warm and sunny, and he turned into the Park, made his way to his favourite spot on the south side, and sat down near the water, for in some way he felt he must change his present way of living, and the space and beauty of the Park suited his mood.

- Two problems faced him this brilliant afternoon—one was his future occupation, the other his position with Evelyn; for, if she lived, he could not be only her friend, yet how could he be anything more with this shadow of disgrace upon him? With all his heart he longed to tell her of his love; yet he knew it was not possible in his present position. She would probably refuse him, even if he spoke, and his eyes grew bitter

as he sat gazing across the sunlit water. Pride, honour, decency even, forbade him ever to speak, unless by a miracle the Foreign Office considered his late work good enough to wipe out the shadow that Kultänn had brought upon his name. Yet, if Evelyn lived, would she be content to let his friendship go out of her life? If she lived—and if she did not?

In the Park, with all the joyous life and colour of early summer around him, Richard faced that question. Its answer seemed simple out here in the sunshine. If she did not live, then he would leave England and go back to India, go back to the Hills, and follow out the work he had chosen to do till the end should come . . . and it would come quickly, strong man though he was. After a while he raised his head a little, glanced round, and feeling chilly, rose to his feet; then, quite suddenly, uttered an exclamation of amazement, for, coming straight across the path to his side, was Scott.

For a moment neither of the two men spoke, only wrung each other's hands in a grip like iron; then Richard laughed.

"I suppose it is you, Scott? You're not a ghost or a creature of my distraught brain, are you?"

Scott laughed too, with suspicious brightness in his eyes.

"I assure you I'm quite real," he said; "and how are you? I've only just arrived. I landed at Southampton yesterday, and came up to town last night, and I've been stalking you. Gad, old man, what's the matter? You're looking rotten."

A shadow swept over Richard's face, and he answered constrainedly.

"A—friend of mine is dangerously ill," he said, wondering at himself that he could speak so calmly. "Naturally I'm anxious. Look here, old chap, what are you doing with yourself? Where are you staying?"

"At the South Western Hotel. I am on my way to my home, you know, in Perth—and I've only a couple of days in town now; but I shall soon be back again; I mean to have a royal time, I can tell you."

"No need to tell me that," Richard retorted. "Look here, you'll dine with me to-night, of course."

"With pleasure. I'm booked for four o'clock, worse luck, but there's any amount to tell you. I'm laden with messages. Henderson's flourishing, so's the dear old Ressaldar, Curtis is fatter than ever, and Mellishe has broken his collar-bone at polo for the third time."

"He seems to have a passion for it," Richard said. "Which way are you going?"

"Foreign Office. I've got to report—cholera, you know," Scott answered vaguely, and Richard stared, but asked no question, though the news was more than surprising.

"All right. I'm on my way to keep an appointment with a lady—aged fourteen," he said. "See you to-night. Where shall we go? Savoy? Right. Savoy Grillroom at eight."

He nodded a farewell, and at the top of the Duke of York's Steps they separated, Richard going up Lower Regent Street, Scott walking eastward along Carlton House Terrace, congratulating himself in having successfully skimmed over a very thin place in the conversational ice.

Richard had promised to take Nancy to Hurlingham, and the two spent a pleasant afternoon, for he exerted himself to make the child forget the dread that lay heavily on both their hearts, and the match was an exciting one.

No further news came from Pangley, and at eight o'clock he met Scott, as they had arranged, at the Savoy.

Scott, for some unearthly reason, seemed in exceedingly good spirits, and the dinner passed off very pleasantly, and not till they were sitting over their coffee and cigarettes did either he or his companion refer to Kultänn. At last, however, Richard put a question point-plank.

"Scott," he said briefly, "what's Devereux doing?"

Scott knocked the ash off his cigarette into his saucer, gazed at it reflectively for a moment, then raised his head and looked Richard full in the eyes.

"Raising hell!" he said, with more force than politeness.

Richard's jaw hardened.

"That does not surprise me," he said. "Be more explicit, if you can. What has happened, for instance, about the reservoir?"

Scott laughed shortly.

"That? Oh, that's by the board. He's full of some gim-crack scheme about the penal laws. Thinks the white man is too mistrustful; so he's taken off the police-patrol on the Peränan road, and lessened the guard by half, by the old fort."

"What?"

"Yes. Sweet, isn't it? He's invited the old mullah from beyond the Border—the old ruffian Mujjian Das was so thick with—and also Abdul Marrhan, to meet for a conference.

Thinks he'll talk 'em into peace. Says we don't reason enough. Henderson's foaming at the mouth, but he can't do anything. He'll get us into a nice mess presently, and meanwhile up in the Hills our dear old friends are having the time of their lives, and preparing to descend on Kultänn to their hearts' content. We shall have a flare-up right along if we don't look out."

Richard leant back, staring incredulously at Scott, hardly able to believe his successor so utterly incompetent, and Scott swore softly and finished his coffee at a gulp.

"He'll start a zenana mission for the wives of the Waziris next or some such thing," he went on. "And then there'll be a row, and poor old Henderson will have the job of wiping up the mess. You should hear Mellishe on the subject. It's instructive, and he never repeats himself."

Richard leant one elbow on the table, frowning a little.

"Who's his assistant?" he questioned sharply.

"Man named Carton. Not a bad chap. Got quite a lot of sense, if Devereux 'd let him use it. But he won't. Lucky poor old Kinloch's not here, or he'd break his heart. By the way, speaking of Kinloch, there's a friend of yours. I want to meet rather badly, and that's Chetwynde. I hope you'll introduce me."

The request stabbed Richard like a knife. In the talk with Scott he had forgotten for the moment everything but the subject in hand, but the mention of Gifford brought the pain back with renewed force. Scott, a little surprised at the result of his innocent request, stared at him and spoke perplexedly.

"What's up? What have I said? Nothing's happened to him, has it?"

Richard met his puzzled glance with a hasty gesture of dissent.

"No, no, he's all right; but I'm afraid I can't introduce you just at present, he's out of town——"

"At a case?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I see. There's no hurry, you know. As we're on the subject, how are you yourself? You're looking anything but fit."

Richard moved impatiently.

"Oh, I'm perfectly fit. Why should I be otherwise? For Heaven's sake don't start in on me with your professional

shop about taking care, and not overdoing it, and keeping my feet dry. I'm sick of the subject of my own health—get back to something more interesting.”

Scott lit another cigarette, and surveyed Richard the while, not a whit disturbed by the sudden irritability, but in his own mind he registered a brief diagnosis. ‘Continued mental strain. Nerves worn to a fiddle-string. Just about fit to get bowled over by the first chance microbe that walks round.’

Even as he did so, Richard leant across the table and smiled.

“I'm sorry,” he said frankly. “What a bear with a sore head I am! You must forgive me, old chap; but I'm a bit anxious. . . . A . . . a friend of mine . . . is . . . ill.”

Scott waved the apology aside.

“Oh, shut up!” he said cheerfully. “You can be as grumpy as you like, and I shan't care. It won't be the first time. But I'm sorry to hear your news. Hope it's not very serious. Shall we be getting on? It's a bit late.”

Richard glanced at his watch as they rose, and saw it was a quarter to nine.

“Too late for a theatre,” he said. “Let's go——”

He broke off suddenly, and Scott, his attention arrested by the abrupt pause, saw his face go white and his eyes glitter, and, glancing to read the reason, saw a woman coming slowly across the big room, her green burnous flung back against the gleaming white of her shoulders, her dress, green, too, and clinging snakelike against her slender body as she walked, her head a little lifted, her eyes half closed. Behind her came a big, full-bearded Russian, elaborately dressed, extraordinarily handsome, his heavy-lidded black eyes devouring the woman as she walked.

Scott glanced back to Richard, and was appalled by the white fury in his face, and for a moment stood silent, waiting for what should come next.

The room was half empty, but the arrival of the newcomers had aroused something of a sensation, for they were a striking pair—the man for his superb physique and full-blooded beauty, the woman for the indefinable charm of her personality and curious colouring; and Scott, aware that he had stumbled upon a very vital situation, waited till the woman should meet Richard's gaze.

It was not till she was almost level with him that something arrested her attention, and she glanced at the two men standing by their table, and then Scott saw her start, saw

her slender body quiver, and her half-closed lids lift sharply. There was a scarcely perceptible pause, and then she altered her course and crossed the space between them, and into her eyes leapt a curious hot light. Careless of the man who followed her, careless of Scott, she went straight to Richard and held out her hand, and spoke.

"I did not know you were in England," she said. "Why have you not been to see me?"

For a full moment Richard stood there meeting her eyes and the challenge that lay in them, his face hard as marble, his figure absolutely motionless; then, without a word, he turned away and walked across to the door, leaving her standing alone.

Not knowing what else to do, Scott followed in silence, and as they drove away, stole a glance at his friend's face.

"Where are we going?" he said casually, as if the incident he had but just witnessed was already obliterated from his mind.

With an effort Richard spoke quietly.

"Home," he said briefly, and silence fell between them once more, lasting till they pulled up in Berkeley Square.

Richard led the way to his own comfortable sitting-room, closed the door with a sharp jerk, and, going across to the open window, stood for a moment looking out.

His senses were whirling, his will paralysed. He was conscious of nothing but a blind fury of rage that shook him as the wind shakes a tree.

Beneath him the Square garden lay cool and dark; in the street below carriages and motors passed and repassed; but before him, in the dusk of the summer night, he could see nothing but the strange, haunting face of the woman to whom he owed his ruin, and the daring challenge of her eyes, hear nothing but the tones of her voice, and the memory lashed him like a whip.

Scott's voice broke in upon the fury of his thoughts, dry and abrupt as usual.

"First-rate room you've got here, Cavanagh. I like that old chest. Where did you get it?"

Richard did not answer, and Scott looked at him curiously. He was immensely interested in the little drama that had taken place, and the face and voice of the woman who had spoken to his friend perplexed him, for it struck a chord of memory that would not be silenced.

He scrutinized Richard's broad shoulders and the back of his head for a minute or two, frowning perplexedly, then uttered an exclamation.

"Gad! I've got it!"

Richard wheeled round, his face set and rather white, his eyes inscrutable.

"I beg your pardon. You spoke to me?" he said. "What is it? What have you got?"

Scott laughed.

"Nothing—nothing of importance, that is—only a likeness I was trying to trace."

Richard looked at him with a sudden glint in his eyes. There was a curious edge in his voice as he spoke.

"Indeed? And you have traced it?"

Scott lit another cigarette.

"Yes," he said; "I think so. May I have a match?"

Richard passed a box, and for a moment of two there was silence; then he spoke.

"I must apologize for my behaviour," he said. "I'm afraid I'm rather a bad host to-night. . . . My nerves"—he laughed, a short, bitter little laugh—"are on edge. Something new for me to be confessing to nerves, isn't it?"

Scott lifted his gaze to his friend's face and studied it for a moment, then looked into the fire.

"I'm not surprised," he said quietly. "I think I prophesied something of the sort a few months back, and I have learnt several things since this morning."

Richard stiffened for a moment, and his hand, resting on the mantelpiece, clenched.

"Then you are no doubt much edified!" he said bitterly; "and I wonder you did not discover you had another engagement for this evening."

Scott did not speak, and Richard, without looking at him, turned his back and deliberately began filling a pipe, his fingers trembling a little, his breathing unsteady.

For a moment there was absolute silence, then Scott spoke with sudden roughness.

"Don't be a bally fool!" he said. "There's no need to think that sort of thing of me. Oh, I know the sort of things they're saying, and I don't care a damn! See? And there's no need to talk about it. Come and sit down and talk decently."

For a minute Richard did not move; then he turned

abruptly and came back to the hearth, looking down at Scott.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Good heavens, what a filthy temper I'm getting! You can kick me if you like, old chap."

Scott nodded, still regarding him steadily.

"That's all right. What are your plans? What are you going to do with yourself?"

"I haven't any yet. Get out East again, I think."

"Ah, I see!"

Scott said no more for a minute, then knocked out his pipe against the grate.

"I suppose you don't intend to do anything else?" he said.

"No thought of settling down here in England?"

"No; none whatever. I shall get out of England as soon as I can."

Scott nodded again.

"Why don't you go out shooting for six months?"

Richard leant his head back against his chair, and stifled a yawn.

"Oh, what's the good?" he said. "I don't want to shoot."

"No taste for politics, I suppose?"

The question effectually roused Richard. He sat upright and stared at Scott.

"Good heavens, no!" he exclaimed. "I don't want to sit still and talk; I want to do something. The present atmosphere of Westminster, wouldn't suit me. Perhaps, after the 20th, it may be better, but even then my inclinations are for an out-of-door life."

"The Election is fixed for the 20th, isn't it?" Scott inquired. "I must be back for that. It ought to be rather good fun."

"Yes; there'll be a goodly fight . . . if our respected opponents play fair—a thing they are apt to ignore at times."

There was silence for a minute or two; then Richard spoke as though the old times were back.

"What are they doing with the land beyond Mir Das's farm at Nushingar?" he said. "There was talk of buying it for the railway."

"Nothing at present. The railway is still at Thāl, and at Thāl it's likely to remain. As far as I can make out, Mr. Percy Devereux, M.A., is not keen on Western innovations for the Eastern mind. Old Khoda Khan is against it, and he

is a great pet of our beloved chief. Wily old devil, he knows which side his bread's buttered ! ”

Richard looked at him sharply.

“ Surely Devereux's not such a fool as to show open favouritism ? ” he said ; and Scott laughed.

“ Oh, isn't he ? He's fool enough to do anything ! Why, the old man has him on a leading-rein : if it weren't so damnable, it would be funny ! He comes to Devereux and suggests that the work at Nushingar, or somewhere else, is very heavy, that Faiz Ullah or Mir Khan, or someone, is supporting ten widowed mothers and half a dozen blind sisters or cousins or aunts. . . . Doesn't His Excellency think his salary might be a little raised, since he has worked faithfully many years for the Sirkar ? Devereux thinks to himself that Khoda Khan is a saintly old patriarch, caring for the poorest of his people, and promptly raises the screw. Then the old devil collars a heavy premium, and Devereux never sees through it ! ”

“ What does Ramadur Singh say to it all ? Has he voiced much of an opinion ? ”

“ No ; he has shut himself up oddly since you left, but Henderson says he is waiting for you to come back. ”

He paused a moment, then spoke with some boldness.

“ Old man,” he said, “ isn't there any chance ? Are you quite sure ? ”

Richard met his eyes steadily.

“ Quite,” he said. “ Put that out of your mind. ”

Scott's lips twisted a little ; he dug his heel rather savagely into the carpet.

“ They say—I've heard, it's taught us—that everything works to a good end,” he said ; “ but I'm damned if I can see what Providence thinks it's playing at in shelving you and sending us that double-dyed idiot ! ”

Richard leant forward and laid his hand for a moment on Scott's knee, and the old smile broke over his face.

“ You all thought a great deal too much of me,” he said. “ I don't want to be sentimental, but it's good to hear you. Don't forget me. ”

Scott looked at him a moment, and then rose.

“ We shall never do that,” he said roughly, “ and God knows we want you back again ! We haven't given up hoping, and we don't mean to. Good-night, Cavanagh ; I must be off. ”

After he had gone Richard came back to his study, lit a pipe, and flung himself down in a comfortable chair to think. He was oddly tired—more, perhaps, mentally than bodily, for the strain of the day had been very great—and now, directly he was alone, his anxiety and all it meant swept back upon him in full flood. The news from Pangley had been much the same. The slight improvement in Evelyn's condition was maintained, but her state was still so critical that he hardly dared to hope for her life, and added to the torture of his anxiety for her came the realization of his own personal suffering. The fury that had swept over his soul at the sight of the woman who had so greatly injured him had been white-hot, and all his strength of will had been needed to subdue it; and then had come news of trouble and danger that Scott had been forced to unfold, and the consciousness of his own powerlessness to avert disaster, which was worst of all. Small wonder that he felt sick at heart and oddly indifferent to the future as he sat looking into the fire.

A low knock at the door roused him, and he started, then, calling "Come in!" stared at the sight of Betty wrapped in a dressing-gown, her hair down, her bare feet thrust into pale blue silk slippers.

He rose in astonishment, but, before he could do more than utter her name, she had closed the door and come across to the fireside.

"I couldn't sleep," she explained, "and I've hardly had a minute to talk to you since you came back. You weren't going to bed, were you?"

He pulled a low chair up to the fire for her, and sat down again.

"No," he said; "but what on earth will anyone say to you being down here?"

"No one will know. Mother has been asleep hours, I expect. . . . Besides, I am not exactly a child now, and I wanted to talk to you."

She paused, and he waited for her to begin, smiling a little at her words, for in the pale blue dressing-gown, with her brown hair loose round her face, she looked about sixteen. At her prolonged silence he spoke:

"Well, I'm listening. What is it, Betty? Cyril?"

A smile curved her lips for a moment; then she shook her head.

"No; he's all right. It's—something rather different,

Uncle Richard." She raised her eyes and looked very directly at him. "May I speak very frankly?"

"Yes," he said, wondering a little at the request and the sudden gravity of her young face; and she bent her head in acknowledgment, and spoke deliberately:

"Do you remember, three years ago, how miserable I was? I thought I cared for someone who—turned out to be rather despicable?"

"Yes," he said again, as she waited for him to speak; "what of it?"

"There was another woman—perhaps you remember that, too—who had a—prior right."

He nodded, wondering what in the world she was about to say. He was not long left unsatisfied, for she suddenly looked at him.

"It was Mrs. Leighton," she said. "I couldn't tell you then—you wouldn't have believed me—and I shouldn't have told you now, except for one thing, and that is this: she is back in town, with her husband, Prince Liadov, and she met Cyril to-day and spoke to him of you. She had heard you were in England. Was it true? Cyril was furious, and I felt I'd better tell you, in case you didn't know; for I thought you might not wish to meet her, and if you knew she was in town you need not. That is all. If I have committed an unwarrantable intrusion, please forgive me."

Her eyes sought the fire again, and after a moment she rose.

"I must go back," she said, still not looking at him. "I do not wish to disturb you."

He put out his hand and touched her arm, suddenly dreading his own company.

"You are not disturbing me," he said. "Don't go for that reason, Betty. And—I knew—but it was good of you to give yourself such a disagreeable task."

She dropped back into her chair and gazed at him in amazement.

"You *knew*!" she said. "That did not occur to me. I am sorry I mentioned the matter."

"You needn't be," he rejoined. "It doesn't matter. Are you too tired to stay and talk for a little? I warn you I am bad company, but I shall be grateful."

"Not in the least. I should like to stay. But you are looking so tired yourself. Uncle Richard—there is something more—besides Kultänn, isn't there?"

He leant forward suddenly, elbows on knees, his chin resting on his hand, and stared into the fire.

"Yes," he said. "How did you know?"

"I guessed," she answered gently. "Perhaps because I am so happy myself that it hurts me to see others—suffer. Love has taught me a great deal. It has made me a woman."

She paused a moment, considering him with grave, tender eyes; then, suddenly slipping from her chair, knelt on the rug beside him, and put her hand on his knee.

"Somehow I feel it is all owing to you," she said; "my happiness—and Cyril. If you had not talked to me and helped me that dreadful time, I think I should have just married the first man mother chose for me, out of sheer heart-sickness, and I should have missed all this. To-night I was thinking about it all, and I wanted to thank you—so I came."

She paused a moment, and he laid his fingers over hers, and smiled a little down at her.

"That is very generous," he said, "and just like you. Betty, I'm afraid you exaggerate sadly, dear, but it's very pleasant to listen to. I hope you will be as happy as you deserve to be, dear. Mellishe is a lucky beggar."

She smiled happily, and, slipping back, curled up on the rug and leant her head against the padded leather arm of her chair.

"Tell me about Dr. Scott," she said. "I wish I'd met him. Tell me all about him. He looked so nice, though my glimpse was very hurried."

Scott proved to be an absorbing topic of conversation, and when at last Betty rose and declared her intention of going to bed, Richard found himself too heavy with sleep to view the remaining hours of the night with the dread he had felt earlier in the day.

CHAPTER XIX

HE woke late the next morning, abandoned his early ride, deciding to take Shireen up to Hampstead Heath for a gallop later, breakfasted alone, and found himself facing a problem which, for no apparent reason, had suddenly assumed definite shape.

He had now been at home nearly six weeks, and this morning it became quite clear to him that he could not continue his present mode of living much longer. That the cause of his inaction had been partly physical exhaustion he knew well enough, but now that the worst of the weariness had passed, he felt the impossibility of continued idleness.

Sir Henry Macintyre's dismissal had been final ; India was a closed door henceforth, and there remained to him, so far as he could see, no possible way of serving his country, save in the method of free-lance that he had adopted since his departure from Kultänn. That being the case, he decided to talk the matter over with Scott, for he knew that it was no good returning to a life of great danger and hardship unless he were physically fit and could show a clean bill of health.

He took Shireen up to the Heath as he had intended and turned the matter over in his mind as he rode, spurred to a decision by the sense of restlessness that possessed him this brilliant May morning.

The news from Pangley had been better ; the improvement in Evelyn's condition was maintained, and her recovery might be looked on as assured if it continued throughout the next twenty-four hours, but to him that matter only urged him to a speedier decision. That he must see her when he should be allowed he knew, but as to what he should tell her he had not the faintest idea, save that, come what might, she must not know that he loved her. That was the one certain thing, for his pride and his honour alike forbade it. He was disgraced ; he had been in love with a notoriously evil woman, and, with the stain of the past three years on his name, he could not go to Evelyn and tell her he loved her. That ultimate despicable thing he would not do.

Yet as he came to that decision and settled it firmly in his own mind, some contrary streak in his nature started a

rebellion, and he began to dream over what might have been—a profitless enough occupation, which punished him severely as he came to the realization of all he had lost.

He put Shireen into a gallop, because thought was getting unbearable, and returned to Berkeley Square, very tired and too sick at heart to want to bestir himself to action. There were some guests to luncheon, and he excused himself to his sister-in-law and went on to his study, where letters awaited him. Among them was one from the secretary of his club. He opened it, wondering what Howard Regan might have to say to him, read it through, then stared at the sheet of paper, with a dull flush mounting under his skin; for it was a brief note requesting his resignation, very courteously and very decidedly—without giving any reason.

Richard read it through twice before understanding its import; then he flung it down on the writing-table with a smothered oath, and stood staring at it, his breath coming fast, his eyes aflame.

So it had come to this—his name was to be taken off the books. This was the reward for all those last daring months, this London's answer to his labour and fighting—this!

He was furiously angry, so angry that it was not possible for him to even feel hurt by the injustice; and when, about four o'clock, he arrived, as he had promised, at South Audley Street, Lady Duncombe was shocked to see how he looked.

She had given orders that she was at home to no one. Nancy was safely out of the way, driving with Sir George, and as she saw him she was glad of it, wondering what fresh trouble had arisen. He came in, shook hands, uttered a few conventional remarks, and sat down near the open window, inquiring for the others.

Lady Duncombe handed him a cup of tea.

"Nancy is driving with George," she answered. "It was such a lovely afternoon that I did not want her to stay in, and the better news from Pangley cheered her up so that she went quite happily. You, too, look as if you needed cheering news, Dickie! You're a positive thunder-cloud!"

He drew a letter out of his pocket, and handed it across to her.

"That may perhaps explain why I am not exactly hilarious!" he said shortly. "Pleasant, isn't it?"

There was a moment's silence while she read it, and Richard saw the colour deepen in her face and her brows knit.

"I wonder if they'll be content short of kicking me out of England!" he added.

She dropped the letter as he spoke, and looked at him with amazement and indignation in her eyes.

"Oh, it's abominable!" she exclaimed—"shameful! Are we all mad, I wonder, that we should treat such a man as you in this manner? And there is no reason—no request even for an explanation!"

"For the simple reason that they don't want one!" Richard said bitterly. "It is enough for them that there has been this scandal connected with my name. . . . Good heavens! how thoroughly someone must have hated me to stir up all this mud!"

There was a short silence. Lady Duncombe had something on her mind, but she did not quite know how to lead up to the subject, for Richard was in a mood that made it impossible for her to tell what he would do or say next. After a moment, however, he helped her indirectly.

"This, I suppose, settles that I shall have to clear out of England," he said. "Obviously, I am going to be given the cut direct by all and sundry, so it follows that, if I want to work, I must work elsewhere."

Lady Duncombe leant forward a little, watching his stern, set profile.

"Have you made any plans? Have you any ideas on the matter?" she said. "Shall you go back—East?"

He leant back in his chair, dropping one knee over the other, and turning a little to face her more directly.

"My plans aren't formed yet," he said. "But I shall certainly not stay over here. I may travel . . . I certainly can't go on doing nothing here in London. I may offer my services to the Government in some private free-lance capacity . . . if they'll have me. But you're right in saying I shall go back to the East. I must!"

She nodded, watching him, with her pretty eyes full of concern.

"You'll not go just yet?" she ventured. "Not just for a week or two—till—Evelyn is better?"

She saw his jaw harden, but went on bravely.

"You will see her before you go?" she said. "Your friendship demands that."

He did not speak for a moment, but his sombre eyes narrowed, and the hand resting on the arm of his chair

clenched. When he spoke his voice was steady, but rather hoarse.

"I think my friendship has already worked her quite enough harm," he said. "I . . . don't think I shall see her again."

Lady Duncombe clasped her hands tightly together, and gathered her courage. At all costs, he must see Evelyn.

"She doesn't think so," she said, a little unsteadily. "And you must not go away until you have seen her—you must not!"

He drew his breath hard, and, rising suddenly, stood with his shoulder turned towards her, apparently scrutinizing a photograph of Renée that stood on a little table close by.

"Indeed!" he said, in a curiously repressed voice. "Why not? Why must I see—Miss Chetwynde?"

For a moment Cecile felt she could shake him. Would he never understand? Then she drew a bow at a venture.

"Don't you want to see her, Dick?"

She had spoken impulsively, almost before she thought, but the effect of her words startled her, for Richard swung round and faced her, all the icy restraint stripped like a mask from his face, his eyes blazing.

"Want!" he cried fiercely—"want! Don't you know? Can't you see that I want her more than anything in heaven or earth? You tell me to see her. You ask me to think of friendship—friendship—when I love her with all my soul and body! How can I see her? How can I? I don't dare! If I saw her, I should forget everything—honour, decency, everything—but that I loved her—and want her. Oh, my God! How I love her!"

He dropped into his chair, hiding his tortured face in his hands, and for a moment Cecile sat silent, stunned by the violence of the storm she had aroused; then, looking across to where he sat, every other feeling was swallowed up in a great flood of pity. He was so strong, and he was suffering all the agony that only strong men can suffer.

She saw the rigid set of the muscles, the tension of every nerve, only betrayed by the hard, uneven breathing; and, seeing, longed passionately to help him, but for a moment or two she did not know what to say or do. Then he raised his head, shielding his face from her gaze.

"I—I beg your pardon!" he said hoarsely.

The steadiness of his voice comforted her, and she spoke quickly.

"There's no need," she said. "I—guessed it."

He raised his head sharply and looked at her, and something in his face gave her courage. She rose suddenly, and, crossing the room, took a chair close by his side, and laid her hand on his arm, feeling the iron set of the muscles beneath her fingers.

"Dickie," she said gently, "you said you would forget honour—and decency—and everything but your love for her. Very well—forget them . . . forget everything . . . and see her. . . . Tell her . . . all! Oh, my dear . . . I know what I'm saying. . . . Do as I tell you . . . tell her all!"

There was a moment's silence, and into his face came an agony of suffering that turned his very lips white.

"Don't!" he said, hardly above his breath. "Oh, God . . . don't!"

She heard his quick, uneven breathing, saw his clenched hands trembling, and spoke quickly.

"She has waited to see you for three whole years," she said very softly. "And it has tired her . . . heartache is always tiring . . . oh, my dear . . . my dear!"

She had accomplished her desperate end, and, for all her courage, her lips whitened, for Richard turned blindly from her, and hid his face on his arms on the table. For a moment there was an absolute silence, and then he broke into a wild storm of sobbing that shook him, strong man as he was, from head to foot.

Afterwards she did not know quite how she sat there, trying not to listen, trying to keep her own self-control. She covered her ears to shut out the sounds; she clenched her hands on the back of her chair to keep herself from running away . . . past all imagining, it was awful to sit there helpless; and yet, despite everything, she knew it was the very best thing that could happen, knew that she had saved him untold suffering.

Presently—it seemed to her hours later—she lifted her head from the cushions and looked across to him. The worst was over, and he sat very still, his face hidden.

"Dick," she said gently, and rising, crossed the room to his side, and laid her hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to my room for something. Don't go till I come back . . . no one will disturb you."

She paused a moment uncertainly, then, bending swiftly, kissed his bent head and went out of the room.

On the stairs she met her husband. Sir George stared at her in amazement.

"Good heavens, Cecile! what's the matter?" he exclaimed. "What *has* happened?"

And, to his amazement, she caught his arm and hid her face against it, trembling and clinging to him, and filling him with a lively anxiety.

"What is it? What on earth is the matter?" he reiterated. "You look a perfect wreck!"

At his words she lifted her face, pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket, and dabbed her eyes energetically.

"It's . . . it's nothing to what I feel," she said shakily.

"But . . . it's all right. It's only that I'm stupid. Oh, George, just put your arms round me . . . tightly . . . and let me *flop*!"

Utterly mystified, as well he might be, but obligingly prompt, he obeyed, and was about to open the door of her sanctum when she grasped his hand.

"No . . . no . . . don't go in there. Richard is there," she said. "You mustn't."

And at this, her husband let go of her and stared in utter bewilderment.

"Dick . . . in . . ." he was beginning, and then something stirred in his memory, and, breaking off, he led the way into his own particular den, and, without asking any more questions applied himself to petting his wife back to her accustomed serenity.

About a quarter of an hour later she rose from where she had been sitting beside him on the big leather couch, kissed him, and patted her hair into its accustomed state; while her husband, watching her, waited to hear her explanation if she should choose to give one. After a moment she turned round from the glass, and held out her hands to him.

"George, you are the greatest angel that ever lived," she said. "I wanted you desperately to do exactly as you have done, and I'm more than grateful. I'd just been through the worst quarter of an hour of my life; but I think good will come of it. I can't tell you more—it's not mine to tell—only I think Richard will be all right now."

She stood looking up into his eyes for a moment, an unusual tenderness in her own, drew his head down and kissed him

twice; then, her serious mood changing, whisked round, looked at the clock, and uttered a cry of horror.

"Goodness me! Look at the time. It makes me, as the French nation say, 'Furiously to think' how I am going to do all the things I want to do before dinner. I shall see you later; good-bye."

She was gone before he had time to answer, leaving him slightly surprised by her butterfly change of front, and also a trifle curious about his friend, for, like Gifford, he had been very anxious about Richard's health of both mind and body.

Meanwhile Cecile, not without some misgiving, went back to her sitting-room, and feeling suddenly nervous of meeting Richard, opened the door without giving herself time to hesitate.

He was looking out of the window as she entered, but, at the sound of the closing door, he turned round and came straight across the room to her, his face very pale and tired, and showing unmistakable traces of his emotion, but directly Cecile met his eyes, she saw a change in them. Something of the hardness and bitterness of the past weeks had vanished and the look of intense physical strain had gone.

For once in her life she felt utterly at a loss, and stood looking at him helplessly, not knowing what to say.

"Dick . . . I . . . I . . ."

She stumbled and was silent, and he suddenly took her hands in his and kissed them.

"Please forgive me," he said, rather huskily. "I don't know why I made such a fool of myself . . . and before you . . . but from the bottom of my heart . . . I thank you for all you said."

Cecile nodded energetically, and smiled up at him, quite careless of the tears in her eyes.

"Forgive me," she said. "But you had to hear it . . . and, now you can face things differently. There's only one thing I ask of you, and that is to make her—to make Evelyn—as happy as George makes me. You're dining with us to-night, are you not? And you are to take Nancy in to dinner; she's nearly frantic with excitement at the prospect. You've just comfortable time to go home and dress, and don't be late. I've got a surprise for you. Good-bye, my dear, good-bye, and—God bless you!"

She lifted her face and kissed him, and, not waiting for him to speak, hurried away upstairs.

Not till he was alone in his own room did Richard look back on to what had happened during the preceding hours, and, although he was amazed at himself for so utterly breaking down, he was too conscious of its inevitableness to be furious at his weakness, and Cecile's tenderness and sympathy had been such that he could not feel humiliation.

He realized, too, that he was very tired : not with the utter exhaustion of the past few months, but with the sheer physical weariness that makes rest a luxury and sleep a certainty. He threw himself on to his bed, and in five minutes was sleeping as he had not slept for months.

At a quarter to eight, Nancy, in all the importance of her position in dining late, came slowly downstairs, conscious that she looked pretty in a new and charming white frock, and that staying with Sir George and Lady Duncombe in town—now that Evelyn was out of danger—had its advantages. She had spent the time since her return with Sir George at half-past five writing in her room, and the new story, begun under the stimulus of London in May, had forsaken the paths of romance for modern times, and dealt with London life with all Nancy's serene boldness.

To-night's happenings were opportune, for she quite realized that it is difficult to write of a heroine enjoying her first season if you have not yet been promoted to late dinner, so there were numerous little things she wanted to observe about the coming evening, and altogether she was extremely happy and rather excited.

She opened the drawing-room door expecting to find the room empty, then, catching sight of a man standing by one of the windows, was about to withdraw till Lady Duncombe should arrive, when he turned round, and she saw it was Gifford.

For a moment she stared at him, the colour ebbing from her face. Surely his coming could only mean one thing? If Evelyn lived he would not have left her. The room swam before her eyes ; then it seemed that before he had hardly had time to move, Gifford was at her side, guiding her to a chair.

As from a great distance she heard her brother speak, and instinctively obeyed him.

"Put your head down between your knees, Nancy. Lower. That's right. Keep it there for a moment."

The simple remedy worked wonders, and in a minute or two the singing in her ears had ceased, the black mist had

cleared from before her eyes, and she looked up into Gifford's face, the colour creeping back to her own in a dull flood of shamed red, as she waited for the reproof she felt she had merited. But it did not come; instead, Gifford spoke gently.

"Why, Nancy," he said, "what is the matter? Are you overtired?"

She shook her head, meeting his eyes with her own frightened ones, her terror coming back to her.

"Gifford . . . Evelyn. How is Evelyn? Tell me . . . Why are you here? Is she——"

She broke off with a shudder, and Gifford, suddenly reading the cause of her terror, hastened to reassure her.

"Much better," he said; "so much better that I'm not going down for a day or two, and next week I think you may come home. She is longing to see you."

Then, remembering Richard's words and his never-failing tenderness for Nancy, his heart smote him a little. He had never understood her, and her careless wildness had irritated him; yet, as he looked down into her vivid, sensitive face, already in the dawn of the great beauty that would one day be hers, he reproached himself for his harshness, wondering why he had misjudged her.

Quite suddenly he sat down beside her on the couch, and took her hands in his.

"Have you been worrying as much as all that, Nancy?" he said gently. "Poor little girl . . . poor little girl!"

A smile flashed over her face at the unwonted caress of his tone.

"Oh, I couldn't help it!" she said, her voice throbbing with its suppressed eagerness. "Evelyn is just everything to me. I couldn't help it. I knew Mr. Cavanagh would tell me all he knew—he promised to. But I was so afraid when I saw you that I forgot everything else. I am sorry; I did not mean to be so stupid just now. You—you are not angry, Gifford?"

"No, I'm not angry," he answered slowly, watching her. "And Evelyn is better—really better. In a few weeks I hope she will be quite well, and on Monday you may come home."

Nancy nodded contentedly.

"That's right," she said. "I'm glad. Though, of course, Lady Duncombe and Sir George have been just perfect to me. If I hadn't been anxious, I should have had the time

of my life. Absolutely! Mr. Cavanagh has taken me out quite a lot, and to-night he's coming to dinner."

"Is he?" Gifford said, rather eagerly. "Oh, that's good. I didn't know that."

Lady Duncombe entered, before he could say more, and a minute or two later Richard Cavanagh was announced.

He came in, his face stern, but with something of the old resolute self-reliance about it, that neither of his two friends had seen for many months. It was as though some unexpected honour had come to him, restoring his belief in himself and the world around him. Gifford saw the change, and wondered; Lady Duncombe saw it, and knew.

He greeted her with a silent handshake, and a long, steady look into her eyes—a look that she understood and answered with a rather uncertain smile, kissed Nancy's eager, uplifted face, and turned to Gifford.

"You!" he said. "Then she is better? Evelyn is better, or you would not be here. When can I see her?"

Gifford lifted his brows and looked at him keenly, for in Richard's tone there had been a very unmistakable betrayal of the eagerness that prompted the question; but as he shook hands, he smiled.

"Next week," he answered. "Yes, she's better. She's out of danger, and all she has to do now is to be patient and get well. It's good news, isn't it?"

Richard met the look steadily, and for an instant his hand lingered in Gifford's.

"Yes," he said simply, "thank God, it is!"

Sir George, late and apologizing, cut short the little scene, and a moment later dinner was announced. Then came Nancy's proudest moment, for Lady Duncombe turned to Richard.

"How nice!" she remarked. "I was so hungry. Richard, will you take in Nancy?"

Richard bowed and offered her his arm, exactly, the eager child knew, as though it were the most ordinary occurrence, and she a really grown-up person; and on the way downstairs and during dinner, he seemed quite oblivious to her short skirts and loose, curly hair, and was as attentive as though she had been the one person in the world that he longed to talk to, drawing her into the general conversation, chatting to her of the doings of the day, and making far more effort to amuse and please her than he did for his average dinner partner.

Lady Duncombe and Gifford both noticed his manner to the child, and Gifford ceased to wonder at Nancy's adoration, and Lady Duncombe realized for the first time what great beauty Nancy would one day possess, for her usually pale cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining, her whole delicate little face radiant and vivid.

Two hours later Richard had his reward, if he felt he needed one, for as she bid him good-night, she lifted adoring eyes to his.

"Oh!" she said, and caught her breath a little. "Oh, it's been too *perfect* even to speak about. I have had the happiest time of my life."

Richard suggested accompanying Gifford part of the way to Harley Street when they left, about midnight, and as it was a fine night, they decided to walk and set off together along the quiet moonlit length of South and North Audley Street.

They walked some distance in silence, both smoking; then, as they crossed Oxford Street, Gifford thrust his hand through Richard's arm.

"I saw Scott to-day," he said abruptly.

"What?" Richard was so surprised that he came to an abrupt halt. "You saw Scott? But—but——"

"I don't know him," Gifford said, finishing the sentence for him. "Quite so. I did not this morning, but he called late this afternoon, and now I do. As a matter of fact, old man, I wrote to him when you first came home—about you. Now, don't fly off the handle, old chap, but listen."

Richard resumed his walk, pulling rather savagely on his cigarette, and Gifford proceeded, not in the least disturbed by his evident annoyance.

"When you came home," he went on as they proceeded, "you were in a pretty low state of health. You'd had a bad time, exposure, hardship, hunger—in fact, everything, on top of an attack of cholera that ought to have made you lie low for some months. Now, I'm not in the least an alarmist, as you know, but I was not at all satisfied about you. You wouldn't tell me anything about yourself, and I could see that any attempt on my part to take you in hand, would merely have resulted in a row. So when I saw how the land lay, I took the matter into my own hands, and wrote to Scott, who's attended you, asking him a few questions. His report came a few days ago, but as he has himself followed

it, he very naturally called on me, and we discussed several things. Now, if Scott has in any way been in your confidence, he hasn't betrayed it. Neither have I. My desire for knowledge was such that a few questions frankly answered gave me all the information I wanted, without in the least intrenching on your private concerns. I found his opinion entirely coincided with my own."

As he ended, Richard spoke.

"And that was?"

"That you were on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown, and in telling you this, I am paying you the compliment of believing that such knowledge will be a help to you to avoid it."

Richard flung his cigarette stump into the gutter, and laughed shortly.

"Nervous breakdown!" he echoed. "You'll be telling me I've hysteria next. What do you take me for?"

Gifford's arm tightened suddenly within his.

"For a strong man who has overtaxed his strength, and is too damnably proud to own it," he said, and there was an odd thrill in his voice.

Richard made no answer, and in perfect silence they traversed Wigmore Street, reached Cavendish Square, and paused at Gifford's house.

Then at last Richard spoke.

"And now that you know," he said, "what do you propose to do with me?"

Gifford paused, latchkey in hand, and, turning, looked him full in the eyes, the harsh lines of his face softening.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "My prescription turned out to be a failure."

A dull flush crept up under Richard's face; he turned a little, so that the moonlight did not fall upon it.

"What was it?" he said.

"Pangley . . ."

The flush deepened, and for a moment Richard neither moved nor answered; then quite suddenly he looked Gifford in the eyes.

"When may I go down again?" he said. "Tell me—when may I go without—hurting her?"

"About Thursday. Not before. Shall I tell her to expect you?"

"Yes. Ask her if I may come."

"Very well. If there is no relapse, Thursday it shall be. Good-night."

They shook hands, and Richard stepped back.

"Good-night," he said briefly, and, turning, walked away across the moonlit silence of the Square.

CHAPTER XX

ALL the afternoon Evelyn had lain on the couch by one of the open drawing-room windows, her face turned towards the south and the white uphill stretch of dusty road. She had reached that period of convalescence when the mind demands greater activity than the body permits, and recovery of strength is a burden rather than a pleasure; and, lying there, she felt too tired to talk, tired with lying still, tired because of the weary ache in her heart.

It was taking all her courage to face life calmly just now, for as she grew daily stronger, she realized more keenly what she had lost in losing Richard's friendship. With all her heart she longed to see him, yet realized that, even if she did, the interview would only cause her fresh pain. He had ceased to need her; that one fact stood out against a background of weary days and dreadful nights—nights filled with a sick longing for the sight of his face, the sound of his voice; nights when her courage ebbed, and she lost consciousness of everything save personal suffering and despair, and lay, wide-eyed and sleepless, till the dawn, when pride came once more to the rescue, and bade her shoulder anew the weary burden of life.

Small wonder that the morning found her tired and silent, disinclined for any occupation, and content to lie gazing southward along the sunny white road, gathering what courage she could for the future.

It was Monday afternoon, and Nancy was to return about tea-time, so Evelyn lay watching for the first sight of the car when it should reach the summit of the hill half a mile away. Just at four o'clock it came in sight, and Evelyn raised herself on the cushions, and smiled a little, for there were two

people in the tonneau, and she saw that Cecile had brought Nancy back.

Five minutes later Nancy's lips were on hers, and Nancy's loving voice greeting her, while Cecile stood close by, wrinkling her pretty face into a rigid grimace in the endeavour to hide its quivering, and holding Evelyn's hand between hers in a tender clasp.

"I can't stay," she said, when the first greetings were over. "I promised Gifford faithfully that I would not talk to you for more than five minutes."

"You must have some tea," Evelyn objected, smiling up at her. "Diana will give you some . . . Why won't Gifford let you stay?"

"Because you mustn't be tired," Nancy interposed. "Oh, Evelyn, don't be! It won't excite you too much, will it?"

Evelyn put out her hand and took Nancy's.

"Of course not," she smiled. "Why, I am nearly well again. Gifford doesn't know how strong I am. How is George, Cecile?"

"Perfectly well. He sent much love to you, and will come down next week."

"And—Richard?"

"Much as usual. He's not ill, but Gifford isn't satisfied. Neither am I. There's nothing exactly wrong with him."

"Dr. Scott's in London!" Nancy exclaimed. "You know, Evelyn, the Medical Officer at Kultänn. Mr. Cavanagh says he's over on special leave. I've met him. He's jolly. He had dinner with Gifford the other night."

The talk veered round to the doings of the past few weeks, and then Cecile took her leave, and sought Diana and tea.

That evening, when Nancy came to bid Evelyn good-night, she curled up at the foot of the bed, and sat looking at her with eager, wistful eyes, and Evelyn, seeing the wistfulness, held out her hand to her.

"What is it, dear?"

She slipped off the bed, and came to stand by Evelyn's side.

"Nothing *now*," she said. "I was only thinking of that dreadful day when they fetched me. Oh, Evelyn, you are better now, aren't you? Really better?"

Evelyn smiled into the troubled eyes, and spoke very tenderly.

"Yes, darling. Really better. There is no more need for you to be afraid."

The child nodded.

"Mr. Cavanagh said the same thing, and, of course, I knew he'd tell me the truth—absolutely, but I wanted to hear you say it yourself all the same. He was so good to me, Evelyn. He used to let me know every night and morning just how you were."

Evelyn looked at her in surprise.

"But how did he know himself?" she asked, and Nancy jerked back her hair and stared.

"Why, of course he knew!" she said. "He made Gifford promise to let him know night and morning—that day when he came down with Lady Duncombe to fetch me. And Gifford used to telephone or wire to him first of anybody. I thought you knew."

Evelyn's colour deepened a little.

"No," she said, a little unsteadily. "No, I—didn't know. Did he come to fetch you?"

"Yes. Gifford wouldn't let him see you. And, oh, Evelyn . . . that night he changed right round, and was exactly like he used to be before he went back to India. And I forgot all about that time when he was so strange and quiet, and different. Am I tiring you, talking so?"

"No, dear. I am glad you were happy in London. How is work going?"

Somehow she did not want to talk about Richard Cavanagh, or to hear of him, even from Nancy, for beneath all her love for him lay her pride, the pride that was her only refuge in this fresh facing of life.

She gathered from what Cecile and Nancy said that he was still in London; beyond that she knew nothing, and sternly repressed all the eager questions that flocked to her lips. And yet—and yet—night and morning, he had had news of her. Had he been anxious, then? Had he cared? Was it just possible that the old splendid friendship was coming back? She wondered many times during the next few days, but no word came from him, and she fought against the temptation to lie in the southern window watching the white stretch of road; and all the while crept slowly back to health and strength.

On the Thursday she received an Indian letter from the Ressaldar, asking for news of Richard—a letter full of the pathos and dignity of the man who wrote it; and when she

had read it, Evelyn realized that she had all her battle to fight over again.

She had been for a drive directly after luncheon, and now was resting for a while, alone in the sunny drawing-room, and, in spite of all her resolutions, her book remained open at the first page, and her eyes sought the garden and the distant stretch of road running to the south—always the south. First in those far-away days of childhood, when she had stretched out her arms to the far-off land she loved, wondering if the wind would take the message, she whispered to her father and mother somewhere in that great blue distance; then, through all the later years, that never-ceasing hunger for the sight of the Hills and their snowy rampart against the sky, the Hills that she had never forgotten and never would forget; and then, last of all, the memory of these last three years, when all her heart followed a man to those same Hills. One evening in particular stood out in her memory, the evening of just such a day as this, the evening when she had received his last letter from India, nearly a year ago, and with that memory came another. It had been a rarely beautiful sunset; she remembered the whole scene as though she gazed at a canvas, the tiny flame-flecked cloudlets trailing across the splendour of the western sky, the wonderful, breathless hush and glory of the dying day, the utter peace and stillness of the country-side, and then, just for a moment, the lifting of the veil, the glimpse of the Holy of holies, and the very peace of God Himself enfolding her soul in its embrace.

Oh, to have that moment again, with its assurance of Divine tenderness, Divine power! to have the certainty of God's nearness now, when she needed it so sorely! Oh, if it would only come to her again, an answer to her despairing cry, a heartening to the courage and endurance that had stood through all the heat and turmoil of the day, and now at evening was beginning to waver.

The sound of a motor pulling up outside the door brought her back to the present, and the longing and passion in her eyes died down, and her tense muscles relaxed: why should she demand a second time the gift that many a soul never once receives in this life? Who was she to storm heaven and leave the battle while it was fiercest?

With a sudden feeling of self-scorn she took up her book, then as suddenly laid it down, for she heard footsteps and

voices coming towards the drawing-room—someone to see her, doubtless, perhaps Cecile, perhaps—

The door opened quickly and closed again, and Evelyn rose to her feet, the colour ebbing from her lips, for there before her stood Richard Cavanagh.

She put out her hand, feeling blindly for some support, her eyes never leaving his face.

"You!" she breathed. "You—Dick!"

He was trembling a little with the rigid hold he was keeping over himself, and he spoke hoarsely.

"Yes. I have come. I wanted to see you."

His voice gave her courage and pulled her together. The singing ceased in her ears, the room steadied, and she was herself again.

"Ah, how nice of you!" she said, holding out her hands. "Did some good angel tell you how dull I was finding my convalescence?"

But that was beyond Richard. He had come to say two things to her, and the first must be said now. He did not respond to either her greeting or her smile, but coming swiftly across the room, took the outstretched hands in his, and looked directly into her eyes, his face a little paler than usual.

"No," he said very quietly. "It wasn't that. It was just that I could not forget—all that has been. Evelyn . . . will you forgive me?"

Despite himself, his voice trembled a little, and at the sound of it, at his words, at the close, desperate grip of his hands, the hunger and longing died out in her heart, and in their place came a great and utter content. She sat down, for she felt her momentary strength going; but she did not loose the clasp of his hands, and looked up at him with a world of tenderness in her eyes.

"With all my heart," she said, very softly. "Oh, my dear . . . with all my heart."

For a moment neither of them moved or spoke; then he stooped and kissed her hands.

"I have been a brute and a coward," he said huskily. "I have distrusted my friends and hated the whole world. . . . I have no excuse . . . there is no excuse. . . . Thank God you can still forgive me—you can let me come back to you. . . ."

He broke off, and again there was silence. It was Evelyn who broke it at last.

"Oh!" she said, with an unsteady little laugh, "I've not

seen you for weeks and weeks, and you must have any amount of news for me, yet we both sit here hardly speaking to each other. And it's quite late. Will you ring, and we'll have tea. Where are your things? Did you come by train or motor?"

"Motor," he answered, taking his cue from her. "And I haven't got any. I must go back to-night."

She met his eyes and laughed again, the delicate colour creeping back to her face: the old gaiety, stranger to her for years, radiant in her face.

"What utter nonsense! You can telephone and have them sent. Of course you are going to stay."

He made no further protest, and when the maid came in, a moment later, Evelyn gave the necessary orders unhindered, and just as they began tea Nancy rushed in, her eyes radiant, her cheeks aflame.

"Oh, you're really here!" she cried, and flung her arms round his neck. "How lovely to have you back again! Isn't it just gorgeous, Evelyn?"

Evelyn looked at Richard, then at the child.

"Yes," she said. "It is the happiest thing in the world!"

Nancy leant her cheek against Richard's head as she stood by his chair and surveyed her sister.

"You're not tired, are you, Evelyn?" she asked anxiously. "It's not too much for you?"

Evelyn's eyes met Richard's, laughter in their depths.

"Not in the least!" she answered. "On the contrary, it has done me a great deal of good. Will you have some more tea, Dick?"

He passed his cup to her, and, rising, stood by her side as she filled it.

"You're not eating anything," he said. "That's not as it should be. Oughtn't she to be feeding up, Nancy?"

Nancy nodded vigorously.

"Yes! Certainly! She has to have milk, and things like that, at night and in the middle of the morning. Evelyn, have some cake, do! It's awfully nice!"

"Yes, do, please!" Richard echoed, and held the cake-basket before her. "I can thoroughly endorse Nancy's opinion. Please eat, or I shall feel I oughtn't to have come!"

"If that is the case, I certainly must have some," she said, laughing. "But I'm really not hungry!"

Gifford arrived by the mail, anxious to see how Evelyn

was, and his first sight of her reassured him, for she greeted him with a radiant smile, and held out her hands to him eagerly.

"How nice to see you!" she said. "Dear old man, how dreadfully fagged you look! I'm afraid I tired you out!"

He came across to her side, kissed her, and sat down.

"Nurse has sent you to bed early, I see," he said. "It's only just eight."

"Yes, before dinner. She and Nancy are cruel tyrants. Did you know Richard was here, Gifford?"

"Yes," Gifford answered. "How is he? All right?"

"Quite. Nancy is playing hostess to him very charmingly, and Diana says she is immensely relieved to see him so much his old self. How long can you stay, dear?"

"I must go up by the eight-forty-five," he answered. "But I shall come down again on Saturday afternoon, and have Sunday here. Now you must try to go to sleep. By the way, which room have you given Dick?"

"The room opposite yours. The one Hugh had when Richard was here last. Good-night, dear! Don't sit up talking too late, and come and see me in the morning before you go."

Evelyn did not see Richard till luncheon the next day, for she was not allowed to rise till about midday; but when she did come down, she found him waiting in the drawing-room. As she entered, he put down his book and rose.

"At last!" he said. "How are you, Evelyn? How is she, nurse?"

"Perfectly well!"

"Much better, Mr. Cavanagh," were the answers that greeted him, and he drew up the lounge chair for her to the open windows.

"That's good news. You're looking much better than when I came last night."

"What have you been doing with yourself this morning?" she asked. "I hope you haven't been dull?"

"Not in the least! I walked part of the way with Nancy, and then went out for a ride."

"You've been energetic!"

"I wanted exercise. What time do you drive? May I come with you?"

"Immediately after lunch. I shall be only too pleased, but you'll find it dreadfully dull. We roll along in state for

a mile or two, and then roll back. It's strictly undertaken for health, you know."

They chatted inconsequently till luncheon, and soon after drove together for an hour, not talking very much, but quite content in each other's company, while the nurse discovered that the celebrated Mr. Richard Cavanagh was not in the least like her preconceived notions of him, culled from common report.

The afternoon was so hot that Evelyn proposed to spend it in the garden, whereupon her lounge was brought out, and she was established in it under the trees. The nurse went in to rest; Diana was somewhere indoors; and Evelyn and Richard were left alone.

They exchanged a few idle remarks, and then sat in silence, Richard smoking, Evelyn watching him, deep in her own thoughts.

Presently he turned to her.

"Do you know that it is just three years since I came here first?"

Evelyn nodded.

"Yes, I know. Three years of our friendship. Sometimes it seems longer."

He was silent a moment; then spoke rather jerkily.

"I wonder your friendship has stood this last year," he said. "You are very generous. The test has been severer than I ever imagined."

"As I said once before to you, what is the good of a friendship that cannot stand a strain?" she said. "And, remember, I knew the truth. The others did not."

He lifted his head sharply and looked at her.

"That is just the reason," he said. "You knew that I—loved her; that I had asked her to go away with me. You knew past all doubting just what a fool I'd been."

"I knew you could never have done the thing of which they accused you," she said, very quietly. "And for that very reason—because you had told me yourself about the whole matter."

He was silent a moment, his lips compressed, his eyes hard.

"I walked wide-eyed into a trap!" he said bitterly. "I deserved all I got. . . . I have paid my account in full . . . and she . . . has married this Russian. Poor devil! I'm sorry for him. He loves her!"

Evelyn started a little.

"How do you know?" she said quickly.

Richard flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette.

"I saw them together," he said briefly. "And I am sorry. That's all."

She nodded.

"That was the worst of all—knowing what was bound to come. There I couldn't help you—I was just powerless. I knew, you see."

"You knew?"

"Yes. I had met Branscomb—three days before he—shot himself. I was only just out, but I have never forgotten . . . and I had heard my father speak of him."

There was another silence; then Richard broke it.

"I am glad Kinloch never knew," he said low. "The boy worshipped her."

"Yes, I know. That awful time! I got your last letter when it must have been just beginning. You said in it that you expected the outbreak daily. It was the day we heard of Mr. Leighton's murder. One August evening, about seven—the loveliest sunset I have ever seen. I had been thinking of you very much—we were all thinking of you just then, and fearing daily to hear of the cholera breaking out at Kultänn—and then came your letter."

Richard threw his cigarette-stump into the bushes.

"It came just after Leighton's murder," he said. "We hadn't much time then to think of the consequences of that affair. Morgan, one of our subalterns, was the first British officer we lost."

He broke off a moment; then leant forward, his hands loosely clasped between his knees, and looked at her.

"Evelyn, did you speak to me once?" he said. "Because I heard you call me three times—just my name. It was after I'd buried Morgan . . . one afternoon just before the rains broke."

The colour left her face a little, but she answered quite steadily.

"Yes. It was one evening about a fortnight after we'd heard of Leighton's murder. Did you hear me? I—I wanted to speak to you. I was afraid for you."

"I heard you as clearly as I hear you speaking now," he said. "You spoke my name three times. It was the afternoon of the day that Kinloch went down."

Evelyn was silent for a little; the knowledge that he had

heard her speak to him, across those thousands of miles, startled her a little, made her realize very clearly the nearness of the unseen world. Presently she spoke.

"It was after—after you had heard—after you knew about her?"

"Yes."

She spoke very low, her eyes remote.

"I think I must have known," she said. "I was so sure something was wrong . . . so I spoke to you."

He spoke low, staring ahead of him.

"I knew you had, but I didn't know why," he said. "Then Kinloch died—and that night I had notice of indefinite leave."

Evelyn's gaze left the blue distance and came in shocked horror to his face.

"That night?" she echoed. "That very night? Oh, my dear! My dear!"

He looked at her, and, meeting her eyes, the muscles round his mouth suddenly quivered. The tenderness and pity in her face unnerved him, and the tears stung in his eyes.

"Don't, Evelyn!" he said hoarsely. "Don't—or I shall make a damned fool of myself."

She reached out her hand and laid it on his, and he grasped it and held it hard—so hard that she set her teeth to keep back an exclamation of pain—and for a moment there was silence; then his fierce grip relaxed. She drew her hand gently away from his, and spoke, drawing him back to the subject in hand.

"And after that—you went down yourself?" she questioned.

"Yes. And that was the end of things at Kultänn as far as I was concerned. When I was fit to travel, Devereux, my successor, came up, and I left—on Christmas Day."

He paused, thinking of that morning on the Thäl road, seeing again through the mist and drizzling rain the faces of his friends when they parted from him by the ruined shrine. The summer landscape faded before his eyes, and in its stead came the sight of rough tonga-road, stretching across the dreary plateau, the wooded lower slopes of the foot-hills, blanketed in rain, the faces of his friends in the cold mist, the sound of their voices and the shrill wail of the bitter winds sweeping down from the north. Back again in his ears came Mellishe's voice: "Good luck, Cavanagh! We shall hear big

things of you some day, I know!" and his own answer: "By God, you shall!"

He had taken the oath, and he meant to keep it, and after these awful weeks, so near to utter despair, the resolution was gaining strength day by day.

The dreary scene faded, and he saw once more the smiling garden and the stretch of the water-meadows basking in the hot English sunshine. Coming back to the present with a start, he met Evelyn's questioning eyes, and smiled.

"I was thinking of that last morning," he said. "One day—soon—if I may, I will tell you all about it."

She answered his smile gladly.

"Of course you may. Don't you know how I want to hear all you can tell me? And afterwards—after you left? You crossed the Border?"

He lit another cigarette and leant back, drawing his chair a little nearer her couch.

"Yes; I felt I couldn't face England. It was cowardly of me, I suppose, but I couldn't. I didn't want to see anyone or meet a soul I knew . . . it's the same instinct that an animal has when it's hurt. It wants to get away and hide itself. That's what I wanted to do. So I crossed the Border. I'd been suspicious for a long time of an old Mohammedan scoundrel, Abdul Gharfur. There'd been two attempts on my life, and I was pretty certain he'd been concerned wholly in the first, and as a tool in the second. More I can't say. Then I discovered that he was in the habit of disappearing for weeks at a time, and no one seemed to know where he was. That alone was, of course, only a suspicious circumstance, nothing more. But one day—oddly enough, a Christmas Day, too—in hospital, I came across a Pathan. He was a patient of Scott's, dying, and he gave me some information—told me about some papers, which I got hold of that very night. They began to clear matters up a little, and I saw that my suspicions were correct. Abdul Gharfur was in the pay of a native ruler—a Prince of a Border tribe—and he, in turn, was in communication with the emissary of a certain great Power. Still, I couldn't do anything—I wasn't free to give the time, and I didn't know enough. Then came the Leighton affair, and after that the cholera, and when I had to leave Kultänn I saw my chance and went north. Well, I got through somehow—it was a narrow squeak once or twice—and I got within a day's journey of Kabul. There I met

a man I knew, a Pathan who is in the Secret Service Department, and I learnt what I wanted to know, namely, that Abdul Gharfur had recently been there, and had met his employer, the Rajah of Belchin. I prowled about the town for a bit, and then one day I spotted a man in the market-place; he was buying some corn, and I knew the instant I saw him that he wasn't Afghan, or Hindu either. I followed him, but he found out and gave me the slip. For a week I stalked him, and then one day Kas-Khan—the Pathan—discovered two horses ready for the road, hidden in an old cellar beyond the main gate. That put me up to the secret, and that night I saw my white friend. I chanced the fact that he'd be carrying what I wanted, and trusted to my knowledge of the place and to my legs to get away with it. They were disguised as Khuki Khel farmers, but it wasn't quite good enough, and the man I was after betrayed himself by an odd thing. When he was in the market, I edged close up to him, and there across the cheek were three faint narrow seams. Now, no other weapon in the world makes those scars save the German *schläger*. So by that I judged where my man had been. Afghans don't go to Heidelberg or Göttingen. He was a European. So I risked it."

He paused a moment, and Evelyn, watching him, saw his hand clench unconsciously and his eyes light up. She did not speak, and he went on:

"It chanced I was right, and I got what I wanted. It was a filthy night, black as ink, with a bitter wind and driving sleet—just the night for an attack or escape. They'd chosen it well. I was on foot, for I knew it might come to hiding, and I didn't want to ride for it. I was ready, and, as luck would have it, the other man was riding a few paces in front. By the time he'd realized his companion was off his horse I'd got the papers and bolted for it.

"They hadn't an earthly chance in the darkness. They daren't leave their horses, and they couldn't follow me on them."

He laughed softly to himself, thinking of that night's work, and Evelyn's eyes shone.

"Of course, they daren't make enquiries either," she said, "or it would have drawn attention to themselves!"

He turned to her, his face alert, vigorous, and keen, with a look she had never seen before.

"That was just it. I had to take my chance of being

knifed, but I did it, and here I am. To cut a long story short, I left Kabul the next evening, and made my way west. It wasn't safe to risk the Indian road. My idea was to get to Tashkand, and then on to Merv, and strike the terminus of the railway.

"I got there at last. It took me three and a half months, and once or twice I thought it was all up. I struck a band of robbers, and they gave me a lively time, and though they missed the papers by good luck, they took everything else, and that was serious. I was a pretty objectionable brute by the time they'd done. I gave 'em the slip after seven or eight weeks, and struck a caravan going through to Teheran, and they took me on, and I worked my passage, so to speak—helped with the horses, and so forth. At Herat I hadn't a penny to get on with, and I thought for a day or two I shouldn't want it either. I think the cholera was having a final kick. Then one day I had the good luck to meet a Persian nobleman. Some day I'm going to meet him again—and he engaged me as a sort of extra stable-help. There, again, I worked a week or two, and then one day I had the good luck to be sent to his house with a message from one of the head-grooms, and he heard what I had to say himself, as it was a matter of some importance—namely, that his favourite mare was ill. She was a glorious little beast, pure white Arab, and worth her weight in gold. No one seemed able to do anything, and, of course, I wasn't allowed any say in her treatment. Besides, I didn't know more than a few sentences of the language. Still, I couldn't see the poor little brute die, so one day I chanced everything, and, seeing him, spoke in French, and asked to be allowed to see what I could do. There are a good many French missionaries scattered about, you know, and this man was highly educated, and spoke like a Parisian. I've never seen a man so startled!"

"I'm not surprised," Evelyn said, smiling. "He naturally would not expect a stable-help to talk French."

"Rather not! Anyway, he gave permission, and I had the mare better in a few days, and absolutely fit in a fortnight. He was extraordinarily grateful—offered me anything of all his possessions, pretty nearly to the half of his kingdom, you know—and, finally, I told him as much as I dared, and asked for my railway-fare as far as Constantinople. His behaviour was in accordance with the estimate I'd formed of his character. He gave me my fare, and money over, for

when I should reach Turkey, and should need European clothes. He had me nursed back to something like decency of health, lent me books, fed me with the choicest food and wine he had, smoothed every difficulty in my way, and in every way gave me of his best. He was the most splendid example of chivalry and honour one could wish to meet, and if I live I mean to go back to Herat and thank him properly. I can never repay him. That's beyond mere money. Of course, I've sent him several things I knew he'd like; amongst them some rather beautiful old French prints. He loved all things French.

"Well, then, I got through to Constantinople, bought some European clothes, saw the Consul, and telegraphed for money. After that, of course, it was plain-sailing. By Jove! I've talked for over an hour!"

He broke off abruptly, and for a moment Evelyn did not speak. His narrative had been so amazing that she hardly knew what comment to make.

Presently he spoke again himself.

"Of course, I offered the information I'd received to the Government directly I got home, and they professed themselves to be very grateful. There the matter ended."

"Ended?" Evelyn echoed. "Did they just take the result of your work, and say nothing more?"

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"They thanked me," he said. "I didn't expect more."

She made a movement of impatience.

"And is that really all? Have they only shown their gratitude in words?"

He nodded.

"That's all," he said; and Evelyn spoke heatedly.

"How unfair! how ungrateful! It is scandalous that they should take a man's desperate work in such a manner! A voluntary work, too!"

He met her eyes for a moment.

"I wasn't working for gratitude," he said low. "Don't you see, Evelyn, that it was just because I couldn't face coming home that I did it? I felt that I wanted to rehabilitate myself in my own eyes, that it was necessary to do something to wipe out the stain I had myself put on—on my honour. It's—it's not very easy to speak about, but I think I know how a woman feels when she's—given a man everything, and he has been cad enough to take what she offered, and has then proved unworthy. It was something the same. I'd told

Violet Leighton a great deal ; I'd let her see what I felt pretty plainly ; I'd set up an imaginary ideal in my heart, and called it by her name. And then I found out."

He broke off, grinding his teeth, and Evelyn laid her fingers lightly on his arm for a moment.

"I know!" she said gently. "I knew before. Don't try to tell me ; don't think about it. Put it behind you, and look forward instead of back. Oh, Richard!"—her voice thrilled suddenly—"I know, I am *sure* that you have a splendid future yet! You're not the man to be thrown aside and left out! Your life is too valuable; the Empire needs it too much! Richard . . . Richard . . . I *know*!"

He turned to her sharply.

"Do you think so?" he asked. "Do you really think that? Sometimes I've wondered, but I've never really dared to hope. But I'd go through it all again, gladly, willingly, if it would do England, and all England stands for, any good. If it were going to make my work more valuable and its results a little finer!"

The passionate earnestness of his voice told Evelyn, even more than his words, what his work meant to him, what his ideals for his country were, and every fibre of her being responded to his words.

Now, as he ended, she looked at him fully, and he saw her extraordinary sympathy in her eyes.

"I am quite sure everything that has happened will do that," she said, and her voice showed her conviction. "Your work can never be wasted, your influence never lost. . . . and I am quite sure, too, that there is still bigger work awaiting you—here, and in this life—when you are ready to do it!"

He did not speak for a moment ; then he suddenly put out his hand and wrung hers.

"Thank you!" he said simply. "I shall remember what you have said."

A blackbird, suddenly overcome by a desire to sing, trilled its long, sweet call from the lilac-bushes near by, and presently another answered it from the further side of the garden. As though fired by the example, a thrush began to twitter somewhere near by, and a tiny breeze stirred the leaves of the trees.

From far away over the fields came the barking of a dog, and once a child's laugh rang out from the water-meadows. A motor passed the end of the garden, throbbing its way up

the hill in a cloud of dust, and presently a couple of farm-waggon's laden with hay slowly followed it, scenting the air with the sweet fragrance of their burden.

Richard sat back in his chair, gazing ahead of him, the blue smoke from his pipe curling upwards through the quiet air, his eyes fixed unseeingly on the stretch of garden, his face rather stern, but with a sternness utterly different from that of the past months—a look, at once resolute and purposeful, the look of a man who has made up his mind to a certain course of action, and will follow it through come what may.

“Evelyn! Evelyn!”

Nancy's voice broke the long silence, and Nancy came tearing out of the house and flung herself on the grass.

“I'm melting, and Diana won't let me have any water!” she exclaimed. “But that's not what I came out for. It's Miss Brabazon and the Hodges! They're coming here, I know! I passed them by Pangley Bourne, and I *ran*! Miss Brabazon looks exactly like a geranium—pink dress, scarlet face; and Tom Hodges—*Tom Hodges*”—Nancy's voice rose to a squeal of horror—“is with her! *Don't* see them!—oh, don't!”

Richard knocked out his pipe and got up, stretching lazily.

“Who is Tom Hodges?” he asked, pulling Nancy to her feet; and Evelyn chuckled.

“He is the son of some awful people at The Grange,” she said. “Papa was a butcher, and papa's father likewise. History is silent as to the ancestry of mamma, which I should think is just as well. If the son had been a butcher, too, he would have probably been quite an estimable young man. As it is, he is a bounder!”

Richard laughed.

“Doesn't sound entrancing,” he said. “I echo Nancy's wish. Don't let's see them!”

Evelyn met his eyes doubtfully.

“But Mary Brabazon!” she said. “You see, she's not very young, and it's a mile and a half here, and it's so hot! *Can* we send her away without a cup of tea, poor thing?”

“I suppose it would be rather brutal!” Richard said regretfully. “What a nuisance, though! It's so jolly alone! However, you're right. We must give them tea on a grilling day like this. It's four o'clock. I'll go in and make myself presentable, and then come out and help you talk to them.”

He rumbled Nancy's hair teasingly, and then paused a moment by Evelyn's couch, looking down into her eyes.

"I've not worried you or tired you, have I?" he asked, a little anxiously, and she smiled and shook her head.

"Not in the least. It's what I've longed to hear. Don't desert me too long in face of the approaching enemy."

He stood for a moment looking as if he was about to say something more; then crossed the grass and went indoors.

Nancy ran after him, and as he went upstairs caught him up.

"I've to change my frock," she announced. "Bother those people! They are so awful, too! Miss Brabazon talks, and talks, and talks! You should hear Hugh take her off, and Tom Hodges is worse, because he's not even a gentleman! As Evelyn says, he's just a bounder. . . . I hate him!"

The intensity of Nancy's tone made Richard look down at her in some surprise.

"So much as that?" he said. "Why, Nancy?"

She flushed hotly.

"Oh, because of things," she said evasively, and went off to her room, not wanting him to question her further, for she was thinking of the episode at the Flower Show last September, and the conversation she had heard anent Richard Cavanagh between Tom Hodges and Mary Brabazon.

Meanwhile, Richard, in his own room, saw the visitors arrive, and chuckled to himself at Nancy's description of Mary Brabazon, for it was amazingly apt. Mindful, too, of Evelyn's request, he changed out of flannels into an immaculate navy serge suit as quickly as he could, and in a very few minutes went downstairs prepared to do his best to entertain the exceedingly unwelcome guests.

As he crossed the grass Evelyn broke off her desultory conversation, and turned to Mary Brabazon.

"May I introduce Mr. Richard Cavanagh?" she said. "Mr. Cavanagh—Miss Brabazon—Mr. Hodges."

Mary Brabazon gave a little gasp as Richard bowed, and Tom Hodges nodded without rising.

"Beastly hot weather, isn't it?" he remarked.

Richard glanced at him, then turned to Miss Brabazon.

"I like it," he said. "But then, you've had a hot walk. Ah, here's tea!"

"Yes, it was dreadfully hot," Mary Brabazon exclaimed. "Jack—my brother, you know—said it was silly of me to

come out, but I insisted. I wanted to see how dear Miss Chetwynde was. How do you think she is looking, Mr. Cavanagh?"

For the fraction of a second Richard's eyes met Evelyn's with a gleam of mischief in their depths.

"Much better," he said promptly. "But then, she ought to look better than when she was so ill, you know."

"Yes," Miss Brabazon said doubtfully; "I suppose so. Ah, here's darling Nancy!"

'Darling Nancy' came sedately across the lawn, shook hands, and sat down close to Evelyn's couch, looking very much on her best behaviour, and Diana and the nurse following her, the awkwardness of the moment passed.

Presently Mary Brabazon turned to Richard.

"Do you know, I saw you in London only a few weeks ago?" she said. "Just after you had returned, I think. Weren't you very sorry to leave India?"

There was a moment's lull in the conversation, and everyone heard the question. In the brief and awkward silence that followed it Evelyn's eyes grew stormy and her lips hardened; while Tom Hodges, breaking off his conversation with Diana, turned a little in his chair, and, putting up his eyeglass, surveyed Richard with scarcely veiled insolence.

Richard's face was inscrutable, and he answered the question as though it were the one of all others that he had expected.

"This is a pleasanter climate," he said levelly. "May I get you some more tea?"

Diana turned hastily to Tom Hodges.

"Are you going to Scotland as usual this year?" she inquired, and he nodded.

"Yes. Couldn't think of going anywhere else. Can't imagine how you can endure to stay all the time in this place. I suppose"—he turned to Richard—"you won't be going up for the shooting, will you?"

Richard placed Mary Brabazon's cup on the tray, and met the younger man's insolent gaze.

"I have not made any plans yet," he answered. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't suppose you would—er—care about it. Rotten bad luck you've had! I suppose you'll sue the *Planet* for libel?"

A glint like the blue flash of steel flickered in Richard's eyes. For an appreciable moment he stood quite still; then he took

up the cup that Evelyn had filled, passed it to Miss Brabazon, and deliberately ignored the whole speech.

When the visitors had taken their departure, which they did shortly afterwards, Evelyn turned to Richard. He was sitting very still, and there was an ominous little frown between his brows.

"I am more sorry than I can say, Dick," she said. "If I had known, I would have let Mary Brabazon walk ten miles sooner than give her tea!"

He laid aside the book he had picked up, and met her vexed glance.

"It's all right," he said. "Honestly, it's all right! I was angry, I admit, at that puppy's remarks, but I knew you couldn't help it. Don't look so worried, Evelyn, please."

Evelyn glanced across the garden to where Diana stood by the white gate trying to listen politely to Miss Brabazon's parting speeches.

"I wish I had taken your advice," she said. "Poor Diana! she is being victimized now!"

Nancy strolled back at this moment from the little group by the gate, and came to a standstill by Evelyn's side, and a big red car sped by along the highroad in a cloud of dust. Nancy followed its course with serious eyes.

"I wish," she said meditatively—"I wish that Tom Hodges had been run over by that car!"

"Nancy!" Evelyn cried in shocked horror, and Richard caught her by the shoulders in pretended dismay.

"You bloodthirsty little ruffian!" he said. "Why?"

Nancy, quite unperturbed, looked from one to the other.

"Because he is a vulgar bounder," she said, "and it's worse to be vulgar than wicked. I forgot who said that. Somebody, I think. And it's quite true. He is just atrocious! Now I must go in and do my lessons. Bother!"

She waited for neither reproof nor blame, but twisted from Richard's grasp and ran off to the house. Richard chuckled.

"Imp!" he said. "But it was rather decent of her, all the same!"

"Nancy is the most loyal little soul there is," Evelyn answered; "and she loves you very dearly."

"I know. Does she know anything of the *Planet's* leader?"

"I'm afraid she does. She heard it discussed by some of the older girls at school, but how much she understands is another matter. But it hasn't made the slightest difference.

I don't think anything you could do *would* make any difference. 'The King can do no wrong,' you know."

He nodded.

"I know. I wonder why? She's going to be a beautiful woman, too . . . and a brilliant one."

"I hope she'll be happy," Evelyn said very softly. "Sometimes I am afraid. Such passionate, ardent natures have a hard fight through life, as a rule. But, oh dear! why am I so gloomy? She is still a child, and there's plenty of time for her to grow wise. Do you know, it must be nearly dinner-time. We must go in and dress."

The rest of the week passed almost like a dream to Evelyn, and Sunday dawned even more brilliantly than the preceding days, with a cloudless sky from the dawn, and the promise of great heat in the haze that hung low over the water-meadows.

Gifford sauntered downstairs shortly after ten, and found Nancy and Alec having a violent argument in the hall as to who should sit next Richard Cavanagh if he went to church.

"He'll sit at the end of the pew, and I shall sit next to him, because ladies ought to go in first, and you'll have to go in in front of me," Alec was explaining as Gifford came upon them. "Besides, I'm a boy, and men and boys are more important in church than women. You're only a woman."

"I'm *not* a woman!" Nancy cried furiously. "And Mr. Cavanagh's my friend, not yours! He never wrote to *you* while he was away. You're only a little boy."

The letters silenced Alec for the moment; then he made a grimace.

"Pooh! I *am* a boy anyway, and you're only a girl; and when I am a man I shall jolly well do as I choose, and you won't be able to. Women are all very well if they do as they're told, but men are—o-o-oh!"

The stinging blow of a riding-switch across his shoulders cut short his speech with a yell of surprise and pain, and Gifford's angry voice followed the blow.

"You young blackguard!" he said, and seized the boy by the arm. "If ever you let me hear you say such things again, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Nancy drew back, horror-stricken. Constantly as she had annoyed Gifford, she had never before seen him angry like this, and the sight was not a pleasant one. He turned to her.

"Come here, Nancy. How did this begin?"

Very unwillingly, Nancy complied.

"We were only arguing," she said. "I said I should sit next to Mr. Cavanagh, and Alec said he would. It was my fault, because it really was his turn. I sat next to Mr. Cavanagh at breakfast and luncheon, and we take it in turns. It was all my fault, Gifford."

Gifford's grip on his little brother's arm did not relax, and Alec's chest began to heave and his mouth to quiver. He did not mind the pain, though his shoulder stung and smarted; but Gifford's anger frightened him, as well it might, and to add to his humiliation and rage Richard Cavanagh, attracted by the noise, came across the hall from the study, and stared at the little group.

"Why, what's the matter?" he exclaimed. "Anybody been killing themselves?"

Gifford glanced from Nancy's horrified face to Alec's furious flushed one.

"Alec has been taking upon himself to teach Nancy the place of women in the scheme of things," he said grimly. "Now I'm going to teach him his, and point out his mistake."

Richard looked down at the boy, and Nancy caught his arm.

"It was my fault," she said eagerly. "Make Gifford believe me—please make him believe me! It was much more my fault."

Alec lifted his eyes, full of angry tears, and met hers.

"No, it wasn't," he muttered, and Gifford looked at him sharply.

"That's not the point," he said. "I'm not going to punish you for the argument. Nancy and you can argue or fight all day, if you like. I leave you to settle your own points of difference in your own way. What I am going to punish you for are your remarks upon a subject you know nothing about. You young scoundrel! How dare you say such things?"

"I've heard men say 'em," Alec cried.

"I dare say you have! There are plenty of bounders knocking about who are only too glad to say that sort of thing, but remember, if you please, that you are supposed to be a gentleman, and to speak slightly of women is a thing that a gentleman does not do. It's absurd, it's ill-bred, it's altogether damnable! Now, come with me!"

Regardless of breakfast or Nancy's pleading face, he marched Alec off to the study, and Nancy turned to Richard.

"I hope he won't thrash him," she said, with a little shiver.

"I hate Gifford to be angry, and he was just furious."

Richard put his arm round her shoulders.

"It's all right, dear. Don't worry. Gifford is quite right, you know, in what he said. Why, kiddie, you're quite white!"

She jerked back her hair, and, putting up her hand, drew his to her lips and kissed it softly.

"Am I? Gifford scared me a little. Will you explain to him presently that I didn't want to get Alec into a row?"

"Yes, presently," he said, and with that she had to be content.

It was a very subdued Alec who came out of the study ten minutes later, and Nancy, who was hanging about the hall, rushed up to him anxiously.

"Did he thrash you?" she asked. "Oh, Alec, I am sorry! I did try not to get you in a row."

Alec met her eyes with an air of dignity quaint to see.

"No, he only talked," he said. "And he was quite right. What I said was unworthy of a gentleman, and I apologize."

As it happened, Richard solved the difficulty by not going to church at all, for he had attended an early celebration, and now meant to spend the morning smoking and lazing in the garden.

Shortly after the children had started he found Evelyn in her lounge chair under the western trees, and Gifford close by, lying on his back on the grass, his hat tipped over his eyes, and a large and ancient briar between his lips. He pushed the hat up, moved so that his head was in the shade, and smiled up at Richard.

"Hullo, old chap," he said lazily. "Come and talk. There's the hammock, and the cigarettes are in Evelyn's lap. Throw 'em to him, Evelyn."

Evelyn did as she was bid, and Richard subsided into the hammock close to her side.

"What a heavenly day it is!" he said. "Cecile's got her wish at last. She's been pining for decently hot weather."

"Well, it's hot enough even to suit Cecile, I should think," Evelyn answered. "They're at Yelverton. I had a note this morning. I wonder if they'll come over this afternoon?"

"Probably, if they are not too lazy," Gifford said. "Oh, by the way, Richard, I wish you'd bring Scott down some time before he goes back. How long's his leave?"

"Six weeks. Special, you see. Do you want to meet him again?"

"Very much, and I want Evelyn to as well. What's that? A telegraph-boy? If that's a call for me I shall curse loudly."

He waved an arm at the boy, who came up, tore open the wire, and groaned.

"No; no answer. Go away! Hang the man! what does he want to get ill to-day for? I shall have to go up by the next train. What's the time? Half-past eleven? Good! I can just catch the 12.5. Evelyn, I shall try to catch the 5.10 down again."

"What is it?" Evelyn asked. "A consultation?"

"Yes. It was not to be held to-day, but to-morrow. I suppose they've changed their minds. Well, I must hurry. I'll wire if I can't get down. Don't get up, Richard. Good-bye, Evelyn! They might have left me in peace to-day."

He bent down and kissed her, and went into the house, grumbling to himself, and a minute or two later they saw him start.

"What a pity?" Evelyn said. "He gets so little rest. I hope he will get down again this evening. He is working much too hard."

"Is he? Yes, I hope he'll get down again."

Something in Richard's tone made Evelyn look at him wonderingly.

"He's lucky to have the work to do," he said, rather bitterly, answering the unspoken question. "I'm afraid I can't pity him for that."

Evelyn did not speak, and after a moment he went on:

"I ought to make some definite plan. I can't go on wasting my time like this. Gifford ordered complete idleness, and I've been obedient, but I simply can't go on any longer. The worst of it is that I've no inclination at all to do anything but the work that is obviously not for me to do. Pleasant position, isn't it?"

Evelyn met his eyes gravely. She had no intention of buoying him up with false hopes, and yet, as she had said to him only a few days before, she felt absolutely certain that there was big work waiting for him somewhere in the world.

"Well," he said at last, as she did not answer, "what is to be done?"

She shook her head.

"The question is beyond me, Richard. The only suggestion I can make is that you should offer your services

privately to the Government, and leave it to make use of you in any way that may be needful."

He nodded, still with his eyes on hers.

"That's the only plan I formulated," he said. "I am very glad that you have suggested it, too. I think it's a working one. At all events, it's the best I can do at present, and this last business has at least proved that I have a marvellous capacity for getting out of tight places."

Evelyn's eyes darkened suddenly. Remembering all she had suffered before, she found it hard to counsel him to leave England again, even though she knew it was the only possible future for him. For a moment her courage faltered, and she spoke as she felt.

"You will take no unnecessary risks?" she said. "You will not deliberately run into danger?"

He raised his eyes from their contemplation of the grass and looked at her.

"I will not deliberately throw away my life, if that is what you mean," he said. "But otherwise . . . I shall take what comes."

For a little while there was silence; then he spoke, again gazing unseeingly at the stretch of sunny garden.

"I have been a fool," he said, and his voice was low and very bitter; "I have wrecked my work; I have thrown away my chance of happiness . . . happiness, greater than I thought could ever exist . . . once—now I know what I've lost. So, you see, with all that behind me, there can't be very much in front . . . and the risk and danger of such work as I intend to do if I can . . . is not a great deterrent. In fact, it's rather an incentive, because . . . foolish . . . cowardly . . . weak though it sounds . . . I am horribly tired of fighting."

He ceased speaking, his face set, his lips compressed, and for a moment Evelyn was silent, then suddenly she laid her hand on his arm and spoke hardly above her breath.

"Richard, are you sure you have—lost it?"

He started at her touch, and met her eyes, and something in their gaze set his pulses beating heavily. His hands clenched, and under its tan his face went white. For a moment he did not answer; then he turned and faced her, forcing himself to speak quietly, though the blood was hammering in his temples and throat, and every muscle was rigid with the effort after self-control.

"Yes," he said; "because, odd though it may seem, I've some decency left, and that decency forbids me to . . . to . . . offer the woman I love . . . the wreck I've made of things."

"But"—Evelyn's voice trembled; she turned half away, and did not look at him—"but suppose, perhaps . . . the woman you love . . . wanted you to offer it. What then?"

For a moment he stood rigidly still; then he spoke, and his voice shook.

"With all my heart and soul I love you," he said. "Now you know why I must go away."

For a brief moment Evelyn did not move, for a mist swam before her eyes, and a singing was in her ears. Then she turned to him and held out her hands.

"Yes," she said, "you must go. But I shall go with you."

Just for a second he stared at her, incredulous, amazed.

"Evelyn . . . Evelyn . . . you——"

She interrupted him, eyes shining, tender laughter on her lips.

"Oh, my dear! can't you see?" she cried. "Don't you know that I would go with you to the world's end?"

When at last she withdrew herself from his arms, her face was flushed, her eyes radiant. With a little uncertain laugh she stood looking at him.

"Is it true?" she said unsteadily. "Dick . . . is it true . . . do you really love me . . . like that?"

He took one stride towards her, but she put out her hand to keep him away.

"No . . . not now. Only I feel as though it couldn't be true. I have been so lonely, and you were so far away."

He drew her down on the seat beside him, his eyes blazing, his face white and strained.

"Kiss me!" he said hoarsely. "Evelyn . . . kiss me . . . let me hear you say you love me. Turn to me, Evelyn . . . turn to me!"

She shivered a little, speaking unsteadily, trembling with the nearness of his presence, fired by the passion that was shaking him from head to foot.

"I love you . . . I love you . . . in all the world there is only you . . . Dick . . . my dearest . . . ah, how I love you!"

He caught her in his arms, holding her fiercely, his chest heaving, his strong limbs trembling, speaking brokenly, incoherently, madly, and for a little she lay with her head

against his breast, and her lips on his, conscious of nothing but the wild rapture that enfolded her.

The sound of voices and laughter roused them at last to a sense of time and place, and Evelyn drew back from his arms, cheeks delicately flushed, eyes shining.

"Oh, Dick . . . we must be sensible, dear. The others are coming . . . listen! Ah! I can't see them . . . not just yet. I'm going in. . . . Tell them I've gone to get ready for luncheon."

He caught her hands, looking eagerly, hungrily, into her eyes.

"Don't be long," he said—"don't be long! I can't spare you a moment; I want you always!"

She laughed softly for sheer happiness.

"Very soon you will have me," she said. "Let me go now."

He followed her on to the open lawn, and stood watching her till she had turned the corner of the house; then, turning away, he walked the length of the garden, and stood at the apex of the lawn, where the old white fingerpost showed above the low wall, looking out across the junction of the roads to the water-meadows, seeing nothing of the view before him, his eyes wide and radiant, his breath coming unsteadily. She loved him—Evelyn loved him . . . she was going to be his wife! He bit his lip and passed his hand across his eyes, trying to clear away the mist that seemed to hang over his brain, trying, too, to regain enough self-control to face other people calmly; then, remembering that her room faced this way, he swung round and stood gazing at the house. That was her room, next Gifford's . . . ah! His heart gave a sudden leap, for from Evelyn's window came the flutter of a handkerchief.

He uttered a stifled exclamation, and was quite aware that his radiant smile would be enough to tell the whole world of his happiness, but did not care. Evelyn loved him, and nothing else mattered beside that.

"What are you looking at, Mr. Cavanagh?"

It was Diana's voice, and he started, and swung round to face her.

"I . . . I . . . nothing," he said mendaciously.

Diana looked him straight in the eyes.

"I don't believe you," she said calmly. "You *were* looking at something, and you've every appearance of guilt."

When a man tells a fib he always looks guilty. Women are more artistic. But I came to tell you that luncheon is ready, as you evidently did not hear the gong."

When Evelyn came into the dining-room all traces of agitation had vanished, and she talked and laughed during luncheon with no apparent effort, and only a very close observer would have noticed any change in her manner when she addressed Richard.

She was still obliged to rest during the early part of the afternoon, and as she went to her room Richard ran upstairs after her.

"How long will it be before you come down?" he asked, pausing at the stair-head. "Because I think I shall go for a walk while you're lying down."

"I shall come down just before four. But, Richard—a walk? It's so dreadfully hot."

He laughed, catching her hands in his and kissing them.

"Do you think I care if it's hot or cold, or both at once?" he exclaimed. "And I can't sit still . . . not just yet. I must have some exercise. . . . Do you expect me to be stone?"

She tried to free herself from his grasp, but he laughed again; then suddenly caught her in his arms and kissed her.

"I love you so!" he said, and his voice shook. "Oh, Evelyn . . . it's just the same thing over again . . . always. I love you . . . I want you! There . . . I'm a brute! You ought to be resting. Go quickly, or I shan't be able to let you go at all."

About half-past four the Yelverton carriage turned in at the Chase gates, and Sir George and Lady Duncombe alighted, and Evelyn, who had just come down from her room, welcomed them warmly, while Sir George inquired for Richard and Gifford.

"Gifford was wired for, and went up to town this morning," Evelyn explained. "We expect him down by the 5.10: Richard is out walking."

"He's just come back," Nancy interposed. "I met him on the stairs. He said he was going to change, and when I told him you'd come downstairs he *flew*."

She went off into the garden without waiting for a reply, and Sir George raised his eyebrows, and quite suddenly Evelyn felt herself blushing. Hotter and hotter she grew as the delicate colour mounted to brow and cheek; vainly she tried

to look unconscious, vainly tried to meet Sir George's quizzical glance and Cecile's amazed eyes, and after a moment she gave it up and stretched out a hand to each.

"Oh!" she said, and laughed unsteadily. "It's no good. I'm so happy I can't hide it. Cecile! George! I am going to marry Dick."

"Evelyn—Evelyn dearest!"

Cecile uttered a little shriek of joy, and rushed over to her, and Sir George wrung her hand hard.

"Then he's the luckiest man in the world—except myself," he exclaimed. "And I'm delighted. Ah! here he is."

Richard came in, closed the door, and stopped short at sight of the little group, and at sight of him Evelyn turned round, a wonderful light coming into her beautiful face.

"Richard, I have told them," she said, and even as she spoke Cecile came across to him and caught his hands.

"Oh, Dick, Dick! I'm so glad—so delighted!" she cried. "It's just what I always wanted to happen. Oh, my dears, I am so glad! God bless you both——"

She broke off, and dabbed her eyes with a tiny handkerchief, whereupon George slapped Richard on the shoulder.

"Best news in the world, old chap," he said. "But, for Heaven's sake, don't let Cecile talk as if it were all her doing."

"A good deal of it was," Cecile retorted. "I knew far better than either of them what was good for their future . . . and it's turned out exactly as I wished. When are you going to be married?"

Just before Gifford arrived Richard sought Nancy, and, finding her reading in the garden, took her book away and drew her on to his knee.

"Kiddie, I've news for you," he said—"the most splendid news in the world. Guess what it is?"

Nancy searched his face with dark, eager eyes.

"Not that you're going back to Kultänn?" she said. "That would be the best news for you, I s'pose."

The boyish radiance died out in his face.

"No, dear; not that," he said. "That's an impossible happiness, you see. It's something very different. Evelyn and I are going to be married."

For a moment Nancy sat quite still, staring at him.

"Oh," she said in a curious stifled voice—"oh!"

His arm tightened round her.

"You're glad, Nancy?" he asked. "It shan't make any

difference, kiddie. I won't take Evelyn away from you. Say you're glad, Nancy."

Nancy responded to the appeal characteristically. She flung her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"I am," she said; "oh, I am. Only I was just so surprised I couldn't say so. And you'll be my brother, won't you? Oh, it's lovely—perfectly lovely! Let me go and find Evelyn."

She wriggled away from him and tore across the grass to the house, fled through the drawing-room, and collided violently with Gifford in the hall. For once her childish fear of him faded, and she grasped his arm, shaking it in her excitement.

"Have you seen her? Has she told you?"

"Seen who? Told me what?" Gifford inquired, bewildered, as well he might be. "Here, wait!"

He clutched her as she was starting upstairs, and in an agony of impatience she halted.

"Evelyn!" she cried. "She's going to marry Mr. Cavanagh. He's just told me so. He's in the garden."

Gifford let her go, and went through the drawing-room to find Richard, and, meeting him just outside the house, held out his hand.

"I've just heard," he said. "Dear old chap! I'm very glad! By Jove! how it's altered you!"

Richard thrust his arm through his friend's.

"Rot!" he said. "That's your imagination."

"It isn't, Gifford retorted. "You look a different man, and ten years younger. My prescription of Pangleys has done you good, after all. Where's Evelyn? I want to see her."

"I don't know. I think Nancy is with her. I oughtn't to have asked her. It was a brutal thing to do, considering my position, and I didn't mean to. I'd made up my mind not to let her see I—I cared till I'd made some sort of a future for myself, but——"

"Behold, your resolutions went the appointed way! As for your position, hang it all! it's you Evelyn loves, not your future; and I'd rather have you marry her than any other man on God's earth. There you have it—straight! Now I'm going indoors to find her and tell her so."

CHAPTER XXI

THE news of Richard Cavanagh's engagement to Evelyn Chetwynde leaked out, as such news will, and aroused a great deal of comment and surprise. The fact that the engagement itself should have come about at a moment when his name was shadowed by a very serious scandal, caused a nine days' wonder, and gradually people began to think that perhaps their action in ostracizing Richard Cavanagh had been a little premature. During his last fortnight of leave Scott heard a variety of opinions about his friend, and pretty freely expressed his own, thereby adding no little to the confusion that reigned.

Towards the end of his last week he dined with Richard and Gifford to the Duncombes', and there met Evelyn. He was curious to see the woman with whom his friend had fallen in love, for Richard had never been regarded as a marrying man, and the general opinion of marriage at Kultänn was that held in most places of its kind ; when a man married, he was no further good for work of the kind that the Frontier required or that in which he had formerly delighted, in short, he was done for, and Scott could hear in advance the groan of disgust with which the news would be received at the club at Kultänn. He was not too pleased himself, for in his heart of hearts he had always cherished the hope that Cavanagh would return. Now it was manifestly impossible, although the fact that Evelyn Chetwynde came of a Frontier family made the matter a trifle better than it might have been. But at best it was unsatisfactory, and he followed Richard into Lady Duncombe's drawing-room, prepared to disapprove.

Lady Duncombe greeted him warmly, delighted to meet a man of whom she had heard so much ; then Richard piloted him across to the window where Evelyn stood, talking to some friends.

Her colour heightened a little as she saw him coming towards her, and her eyes lit up. She excused herself, and turned to meet him.

"Ah! you have come," she said. "I was afraid you would be late."

Their eyes met as they shook hands, and Richard smiled.

"Yes, Evelyn. May I introduce Dr. Scott? Scott—Miss Chetwynde."

Scott bowed, but Evelyn held out her hand and smiled into his eyes as though she greeted an old friend.

"I have wanted to meet you for a very long time," she said. "You are to take me in to dinner, so please resign yourself to blatant 'shop.'"

Richard glanced from Scott's face to Evelyn, and his eyes smiled.

"Real shop, Scott," he said. "Don't forget Miss Chetwynde belongs to the Frontier, and won't be put off by polite drawing-room conversation."

Evelyn answered the smile, laying her hand on his arm for a moment.

"Indeed I will not," she said. "I belong to Kultänn more than either of you. I was born there."

Scott was unwilling to be vanquished, but before dinner was half over he began to realize that he had, as it were, been condemning Richard unheard. Evelyn Chetwynde upset many of his preconceived notions and pet theories about women. She was beautiful, gracious, fascinating—that he had been ready to admit the moment he saw her, and that alone would have caused very little change in his opinion; but beneath all her charm of manner lay a deep, intense love for the land of her birth, an almost passionate desire for its welfare and a clear-sighted appreciation of the difficulties of its administration, that compelled his unwilling admiration.

She questioned him closely with regard to the state of things under Percy Devereux, and by the time dessert was on the table Scott found himself talking to her with a freedom that astounded him when he thought about it afterwards.

"Devereux is a man of theories!" he said, in response to a direct query from his companion. "Whereas, what we want is a man of action. He's undoing all Cavanagh's work, and my only wonder is that we haven't had a flare up before this. He's set half the district by the ears already, and the other half grovels and flatters and lies to its heart's content. I'd give my soul to have Cavanagh back again."

Evelyn's eyes sought Richard's face, and rested there a moment. He was sitting further down the table at the other side, and just at that moment was not talking, but listening to some discussion going on around him. The resolute, self-reliant look that Scott knew so well of old had come back to his face, and there was about his whole personality a curious sense of renewed vitality and strength.

Scott's gaze followed Evelyn's, and rested, as hers had done, on the strong, handsome face; then he spoke, half to himself:

"By Jove! he's a born leader!"

Evelyn turned back to him, a proud, tender light in her eyes.

"Yes," she said, very softly; "he was born to command, for he is above all things a *man*!"

Scott misinterpreted the look he saw.

"I suppose I'm talking treason, now that he's going to marry, when I say he ought to come back to us," he said, rather sarcastically, and met Evelyn's eyes, dark with sudden anger.

"You are making a mistake when you suppose that, Dr. Scott," she said quietly. "I would give everything I have in the world if Richard could go back to Kultänn."

Scott stared.

"But you?" he said. "What would you do?"

"I should go with him," she replied. "I think you hardly realize what Kultänn's welfare means to me. You forget that I grew up in sight of the Hills, that I am my father's daughter. Do you think my love for Richard has killed my love for the Frontier? Ah, you don't understand!—indeed, you don't understand!"

Scott was silent a moment; then a rare impulse moved him.

"I think I do—now," he said, with unusual gentleness, "and I beg your pardon for the harsh things I have thought of you."

She met his eyes, the anger and hurt reproach dying out of her own.

"I am glad," she said. "I want Richard's friends to be mine. It was very natural you should have misjudged me. You won't any more, because you'll realize, against my great crime in marrying Richard"—a hint of mischief dawned in her eyes—"is the extenuating circumstance that I am a Chetwynde by instinct as well as name and blood. And the Chetwyndes belong to the Frontier. So, if ever I come out, if some happy chance should bring us back, will you promise to help me to try to make the others—Colonel Henderson, Captain Mellishe—all—understand, too?"

Scott's keen blue eyes met hers in a long, steady look; then he spoke.

"Yes," he said; "I will."

For a few moments neither of them spoke again to each

other, for Evelyn had to devote her attention to a rather justly enraged barrister on her left, and, while the soothing process was taking place, Scott meditated over the shock his ideas had received. Presently she turned back to him.

"I really have been dreadfully rude to him," she said. "I had to be abjectly apologetic. He's forgiven me, so now I can talk to you again for a few minutes. Please tell me exactly how you left the Ressaldar."

Scott frowned.

"He's well in health," he said, "but there's an amazing change in him. His heart is bound up in Cavanagh, and he has never been the same since he left."

"Poor old man!" Evelyn said, half under her breath. "I know what he is feeling."

Scott spoke rather gruffly.

"Every day he rides out about six o'clock to a certain place on the Thāl road five miles away. I only found it out by accident. He doesn't know anyone knows. It's the place where we parted from Cavanagh. We rode with him as far as the ruined shrine, and I saw the Ressaldar . . . still as a rock, horse and man . . . facing towards Thāl. And every day, wet or fine, heat or cold, he waits there for an hour; waits for Cavanagh to come back."

He stopped rather abruptly, and Evelyn did not reply. Before her eyes the scene stood out vividly: the desolate arid country, the empty road stretching to the east, and by the ruined shrine a solitary watcher on horseback, waiting, always waiting, the big stallion's head turned to the east, so that his master could watch the empty road for the loved figure that never came.

Scott's voice brought her back to the present, and she turned to him, realizing suddenly that she had not understood a word.

"I am sorry," she said; "I did not hear. Please forgive me."

"It was nothing," he hastened to assure her. "I only asked you not to tell Cavanagh. It might hurt him."

"It would. I will say nothing. Oh, if only they would send him back! I've vague wild hopes that if we get in at this Election it may be done. I wonder."

Just before he left, Richard had a moment or two alone with Evelyn, thanks to Lady Duncombe's kindness; for she took Evelyn apart on some pretext or other, and a moment

or two later sent Richard to her boudoir on an absolutely false errand to fetch a non-existent fan.

Richard ran upstairs, and went into the room ; then, seeing Evelyn, slammed the door to behind him and caught her in his arms.

" I didn't know you were here ! " he exclaimed. " Bless Cecile, she's an angel ! Oh, Evelyn ! it's true, I suppose ? "

Evelyn leant her head back against his shoulder.

" What is true ? " she asked.

His arms tightened round her, and his face hardened.

" That you love me," he said—" that you love me. Don't keep me waiting ; we've wasted so many years ! Come to me soon, Evelyn—soon ! I love you so . . . I . . . I want you . . . want you with every fibre of my being . . . don't you know . . . can't you see . . . *how* I love you ? "

She trembled a little, and her breath came unsteadily. The fire of his ardour and the fierce intensity of the passion that glowed in his eyes shook her with an answering emotion, and for a little she did not move, but lay in his arms, unconscious of everything but her love. Presently she roused herself.

" Dearest, what will they think of us ? We must go back. What made you come, Richard ? "

" I don't know," he said. " I haven't the least idea. Evelyn, can't we stay here just five minutes longer ? "

" No, not one ! Come at once ! Oh, I forgot to tell you that I like Dr. Scott immensely ! We talked all dinner-time. . . . Ah, there is Cecile ! "

The following day Evelyn returned to Pangley, and Richard, acting on her advice, wrote to Sir Henry Macintyre and offered his services privately should they care to make use of them in the work which he intended to make his own. It was, of course, just possible that he would be at once sent off to some remote part of the world, but, even so, it would be better to at once commence to work out his future ; for Evelyn was very ambitious for him, and knew that he would never be really happy living idly in England.

The Election took place early the following month, and resulted in a hardly gained Unionist victory, and less than a fortnight later Richard received his answer from the India Office.

He was writing letters when it was brought to him, and,

seeing what it was, he tore open the envelope hastily and read through the brief note.

“INDIA OFFICE,
“WHITEHALL.
“June 8th.

“SIR,

“I am desired by Lord Hill to notify you that your leave has been rescinded, and that you are requested to report yourself to him, for duty at Kultänn, not later than September 1st.

“Yours faithfully,
“J. R. CARTWRIGHT (*Sec.*)”

Richard read the letter through twice before he grasped its import; then he thrust it into his pocket, and, like a man in a dream, went out into the hall. His brother was just going out.

“Are you coming——” he began, then stopped abruptly.

“What has happened?” he said.

Richard thrust the letter into Frank’s hands, and stood watching him while he read it. Frank turned to him with glowing eyes.

“Thank God! It is the best news in the world,” he said. “Wire Miss Chetwynde.”

At three o’clock Richard went to the India Office, left it again shortly after four, and caught the 5.10 to Pangley. He found Evelyn in the drawing-room, and at sight of him she started up in alarm.

“Richard, you! What is it?” she exclaimed. “Is anything wrong?”

He caught her hands in his, and his eyes shone.

“I am going back to Kultänn,” he said. “Read this!”

It was a minute or two before Evelyn quite grasped the truth of the astounding news Richard had brought, and, when she did, the realization of all it meant wellnigh overwhelmed her. She held out her hands to him and lifted her lips.

“Oh, my dear . . . I am so glad!” she said unsteadily. “God bless you . . . God bless you!”

He kissed her, and for a moment held her close without speaking; for, though her words had been commonplace enough, all her heart went with them, and he knew it.

Presently she drew away from him, and took a low chair by the open window.

"Come and sit down!" she said, speaking more lightly. "I want to hear all about it—everything. Begin right at the beginning."

"There isn't one!" he said, taking the seat beside her. "I'm as surprised as you are. You know what my interview with Macintyre was; I told you all about it. Well, I've heard nothing more from him. And now comes this from Hill. Evelyn, it can't be true—it can't! I'm afraid to believe it . . . afraid to even think about it . . . to go back . . . to see my people . . . to work again there, to have a chance to do all I meant to for Kultänn after all . . . I . . . I . . ."

He broke off for a moment, and when he spoke again his voice was very low.

"God knows I don't deserve it. You must help me. . . . You will come with me. You can be ready?"

"By the first of October? That means starting from here about the first week in September. Only two months! Yes, I will come. Do you think I could bear to let you go away again? But, oh, Dick! Nancy . . . how can I leave Nancy?"

That was a question to which Evelyn could find no answer. It was impossible to take Nancy with them. Had she been a year or two older, it would have been another matter, but, as it was, it was not to be thought of; yet she could not be sent to school.

Evelyn shivered at the thought of how the passionate, loving little heart would suffer at the parting in store; yet it could not be avoided, for Richard needed her, and, whatever happened, she must go with him.

Gifford and Hugh both came down for the week-end, and the one topic of conversation was naturally Richard's return to India and the immense changes it would make. Nancy had taken the news very quietly, rather to Evelyn's surprise, and seemed as interested as anyone in all the plans that were discussed, only to be cast aside; but on the Saturday morning she broke out into one of her rare fits of naughtiness, refused point-blank to go to school, quarrelled with Alec, disobeyed Evelyn, and generally did everything she ought not.

Even Hugh, who was her unfailing champion, lost his

patience, and spoke to her sharply when she came down to dinner after everyone had finished their soup.

She scowled at him as she took her place, and jerked back her hair mutinously.

"I didn't know it was your right to scold me!" she retorted. "It's nothing to do with you if I'm ten minutes late or twenty!"

"Nancy, be quiet!" Gifford said sharply, and Nancy subsided, and was barely civil during the rest of the meal.

She was to go to bed at eight-thirty instead of nine, as a punishment for some of the misdeeds of the day, and immediately dinner was over she slipped away without saying good-night to anyone, and, when Evelyn went up to bed, three hours later, she was apparently fast asleep.

Evelyn stood for a moment looking down at her, before she finally put out the light; she was grieved and puzzled by her little sister's conduct, and had hoped that perhaps some explanation or excuse might be forthcoming. But Nancy lay motionless, her face half hidden by the tangle of curly hair, breathing evenly, and to all appearance sound asleep.

The next morning she dressed before Evelyn awoke, but all the same came in late to breakfast, and took her seat without an apology, or even a greeting. For a wonder, Gifford said nothing, but Evelyn spoke with unwonted severity in her tone.

"Why are you late, Nancy?"

Nancy shrugged her shoulders.

"Because I'm not early, I suppose!" she answered casually; and before Evelyn could reply, Richard very unwisely entered the arena.

"Remember to whom you're speaking, if you please, Nancy," he said; and Nancy lifted her head and stared at him.

"I shall speak how I like!" she said. "Please wait till you are married to Evelyn before you start scolding me. I suppose then you will have the right to, being one of the family. Pass the butter, please, Hugh."

Hugh passed it.

"You are an ill-mannered little wretch this morning," he said. "Got out of bed the wrong side, I suppose."

She did not deign to reply, and immediately the meal was over was going out of the room, when Evelyn stopped her.

"Be ready at half-past ten," she said. "You are not to be a moment late."

Nancy stopped short and faced her.

"I'm not coming to church this morning," she said.

Evelyn was a little tired, for she had been very busy and rather anxious during these last few days, and she spoke sharply.

"Don't be absurd. You are to go, of course."

Richard was smoking a cigarette and waiting for Evelyn, his eyes fixed on the child's face, and as Evelyn spoke he noticed how pale it was as she lifted her head.

"I'm not coming!" she repeated obstinately.

"You are to do as you are told, Nancy."

Nancy's pale little face set hard.

"I won't!" she said. "And you can't make me!"

"Nancy!"

Evelyn's tone of amazement brought a flush to the child's cheeks, but she did not withdraw her words.

"You may 'Nancy' me as much as you like, but I won't!" she repeated; and turning on her heel, walked deliberately out into the garden.

For a moment Evelyn gazed after her, then turned to Richard with horrified eyes.

"Richard, what can be the matter? I have never known her behave so in all her life before—and she has been rude to me! she has defied me! I can't understand it. Nancy has never been naughty to me before."

Richard slipped his hand through her arm as they crossed the hall together. Dearly as he loved the child, he could not but be annoyed at her treatment of Evelyn.

"I can't understand it, either," he said. "But if I may, I'll talk to her presently. She's certainly been very rude."

"Don't scold her! Don't be angry!" Evelyn hastened to say. "There may be something causing it—something we know nothing about. It's so utterly unlike Nancy that I think there must be."

Nancy kept her word, and did not appear at church-time, so the others started without her; and all through the service Evelyn's thoughts kept straying back to her little sister, trying to find some excuse for her, and wondering over and over again what was the meaning of such an unusually violent outbreak of naughtiness.

Meanwhile, Gifford, not having accompanied the others to church, had started out for a long walk, intending to return just in time for one-thirty luncheon.

It was a very hot day, however, and, instead of carrying out his original intention, he flung himself down under a hedge in a meadow not half a mile from home, and there lay smoking and idly enjoying his unwonted leisure, till he was suddenly aware of a sound that made him sit up and look about him—the sound of thundering hoofs coming down the meadow at full gallop.

He wondered who on earth could be riding at such a pace across country on such a day, and got to his feet, oddly curious ; then uttered a stifled exclamation, for, tearing down the slope of the meadow on his left, was Rufus, Evelyn's big chestnut hunter, and on his back, urging him on, her hair flying, her face white and set, looking strangely small and helpless, was Nancy. Down the slope they thundered, and Gifford felt his heart hammering at his throat, for the bank and ditch at the bottom was a bad place, and he was powerless to avert the catastrophe which seemed inevitable.

Nearly at the bank Nancy suddenly leaned forward, and Rufus, answering to her guidance, rose magnificently, and landed square and safe not five yards from where Gifford stood.

For a moment he was so astonished at his little sister's horsemanship that he did not move ; then, realizing the risk she had run, he shuddered and went forward to speak to her. But Nancy had not seen him, and, wheeling Rufus to the right, she cantered easily across the meadow, jumped the gate, and rode into the Chase stables.

Gifford's face set grimly. He picked up his pipe and book, crossed the field, and went in search of the culprit.

Only an astonished groom met him in the stables.

"Will you speak to Miss Nancy, sir ?" he exclaimed. "I don't want to tell tales, sir, but 't isn't safe for a child to ride Rufus. He's a bit ugly sometimes, and it's against the mistress's orders for Miss Nancy to ride him at all."

Gifford looked at the lathered horse and then at the man's worried face.

"I will see it does not occur again," he said. "How was it you let her take him out ?"

"I'd gone over to get some fresh straw, sir, and just as I was a-comin' back I heard a clatter, but didn't think nothing till I'd finished the pony's box. Then I come into the stable, and see Rufus gone."

"Ah ! Very well. I will see to it," Gifford said ; and,

turning on his heel, went indoors with a look on his face that boded ill for Nancy.

He found her at last in the attic where she loved to write, standing by the window, and as he entered and closed the door, she turned and faced him, white and defiant.

"I suppose you've come to punish me about Rufus," she said. "Well, I'm ready!"

He seized her shoulders none too gently.

"You deserve the soundest thrashing you ever had in your life," he said. "How dare you do such a thing!"

She did not answer him, but faced him proudly, her head flung back, her lips set, and at her mute defiance he lost his own temper thoroughly. Without a word he marched her down to his study, and then took the cane that lay in readiness for the boys out of a table-drawer.

"Hold out your hands!" he said harshly; and she obeyed, and took the six strokes without flinching or sign of emotion save the colour that crept up under her skin, staining the delicate pallor of her face crimson.

When he had ended, she spoke quite steadily.

"May I go now?"

He swung round from the table and looked at her.

"No!" he said curtly. "I want an explanation of your conduct first."

She put her hands behind her, and lifted her chin a little higher.

"I haven't one."

"Then you had better find one soon," he said curtly, "because you will stand there till you do. You might have killed yourself over this last piece of disobedience."

The shamed colour was fading slowly from her face, leaving it very white. For a moment more she was silent; then suddenly the rising tumult of emotion broke bounds.

"I wish I had!" she cried passionately. "I wanted to. Let me go—oh, *please* let me go!"

She tried to break away from his grasp, twisting to hide her face from his eyes, quivering from head to foot, and for a moment he held her relentlessly; then, suddenly realizing the futility of her efforts, she became absolutely still. He let go her hands when she ceased to struggle, and, walking to the window, stood looking out for a moment. Then he turned round and sat down.

"Come here!" he said, and she came, the defiance gone

from her face, and in its place a look of hopeless misery that shocked him.

"What is the matter, Nancy?" he said. "There's something wrong, isn't there? What is it? Tell me!"

She caught her breath and shivered, her eyes dark with misery.

"Oh . . ." she said, almost in a whisper. "I *wanted* something to happen. I hoped and prayed it would! I don't want to live. . . ."

"Don't want to live!" he echoed. "Why not?"

She put one of her hands to her throat, wincing with the pain of the caning as she moved it.

"She's going away," she said, in a strangled little voice—"for always!"

Gifford's stern face suddenly altered. He began to see light.

"Who's going away?" he said, more gently; and the child's self-control suddenly left her.

"Evelyn!" she cried fiercely. "She's going away—to India—and Mr. Cavanagh. Both of them! And they can't take me because of the climate. I heard Evelyn say so. They're both going away, and I . . . I'm to be left behind. . . . Oh, I can't! I can't! I want to go too! I will go! I must!"

"Nancy! Poor little girl!"

For the first time in his life Gifford understood his little sister, and at the last passionate cry he took her into his arms.

"Nancy . . . Nancy . . . don't, dear!"

She did not cry, but the dry strangled sobs seemed as if they would choke her, and her slender little form was shaken from head to foot, and her hands clutched each other desperately round his neck.

"Nancy, dear, Nancy . . . why didn't you tell me before?" he whispered, and brushed the tangled curly hair tenderly off the hot forehead. "Why did you keep it all to yourself so long?"

She shuddered, burying her face deeper against his shoulder.

"I . . . couldn't tell Mr. Cavanagh because he . . . he would be worried . . . and it would have made Evelyn unhappy," she gasped; and his arms tightened round her.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She lifted her face, white and tortured, suddenly to his.

"You never understood," she cried. "I was afraid to

bother you . . . and now they're going . . . and I shall have no one . . . no one! Oh, Evelyn! Evelyn!"

He gathered her up as if she had been a baby, walked across the room, and sat down on the couch with her in his arms, holding her closely to him, and so let the tempest of rare weeping have its way. He was shocked to realize how she had suffered, and bitterly regretted the punishment he had administered. He blamed himself for not seeing that sheer misery had driven the child desperate, and now hardly knew how to comfort her, and longed for either Evelyn or Richard to come in.

After a while, from sheer exhaustion, she grew quieter and lay still, worn out with the violence of her grief, her face hidden against his breast; and just as he was about to speak to her, Richard came in. He started at sight of them, and drew back.

"I beg your pardon, old chap!" he said hastily, but Gifford stayed him.

"Come here!" he said; and Richard shut the door and came across to him, glanced at Nancy, then at his friend, then back to the child. Gifford nodded, and Richard bent down and touched her hair.

"Why, kiddie dear," he said very softly. "You're not ill, are you?"

At the sound of his voice, Nancy sat up, trying to hide her face, and Richard let her go.

"No. But I think she wants you," he said, speaking for her. "And I've been a brute. . . ."

Forgetful of her flushed, tear-stained face, she suddenly sprang to her feet and faced them both.

"You haven't! You haven't! I deserved it, every bit. Only . . . only . . ."

The distressful tears refused to be kept back, and rose again in the dark eyes. Richard sat down and drew her on his knee.

"I know, kiddie dear," he said. "Be brave!"

She leant her head against his, her lips on his cheek; and Gifford, who had risen, patted her shoulder, oddly jealous of his friend.

"I will try," she said at last. "Please, Mr. Cavanagh, will you lend me your handkerchief?"

He gave it her at once, and Gifford stood by watching the two of them.

Richard turned his head a little, so that his lips met her quivering mouth and kissed it.

"You shall come as soon as ever you are a little older, dear," he whispered. "And we shall want you, and miss you all the time. We shan't forget you. You know that, don't you, Nancy?"

She nodded.

"Ye-es."

"You see, kiddie dear, I haven't the pluck to go back alone," he went on, careless of his friend, longing only to comfort the child he loved. "You know a bit about the bad time I had, don't you? And, Nancy, I shan't want my little kiddie any less because I've got Evelyn, and Evelyn won't long for you any less because she's got me. I know it's hard, darling . . . but it's the hard things that make us men, you know. Don't forget that."

He broke off a moment, and Gifford went quietly out of the room, no longer wondering at Nancy's passionate adoration of his friend. There was a short silence in the room he had left; then Nancy spoke unsteadily:

"I will try. I did mean to be brave, and I've been *crying*. I know it's horribly cowardly to cry."

The shamed flush crimsoned her face, and he drew her a little closer, looking up into her eyes.

"It's not cowardly to cry sometimes," he said, and she swallowed hard.

"You're saying that just to make me feel better," she said painfully, "and it doesn't. . . . I'm nearly fifteen . . . and it was dreadful!"

His fingers tightened round her hand as it lay in her lap.

"No, I'm not," he said. "I mean it," and spoke very low. "I have done it myself—not so very long ago."

In absolute amazement Nancy stared at him.

"You!" she said, hardly above her breath. "You!"

He nodded, a dull flush staining his face.

"Yes; only a few weeks back. . . . Things had hit me very hard . . . and I . . . couldn't stand it any longer; so, you see, you're not the only one."

She nodded and kissed his cheek, and again there was silence; then he spoke very low.

"There's one other thing, kiddie dear . . . don't forget that there is Someone who is always waiting to help you. I don't want to preach to you, dear, but don't forget."

She met his eyes fully, and nodded.

"I won't," she said, very softly. "And . . . and *thank* you for reminding me. I'm afraid I had a little, but I won't any more. Now I must go, or Evelyn will see me."

All that day Gifford's thoughts never strayed far from Nancy. He, too, foresaw the impossibility of sending her to school, and yet what else could be done? It was equally impossible for her to go to India for at least two years, although he knew that both Evelyn and Richard would have been only too glad to take her with them. The only alternative, to his mind, was to come to the rescue himself, and take her to live with him; for Pangley would, of course, be let, Alec would join Hilary at School, and Gifford's house in London would naturally be a home during all vacations.

The idea refused to be banished, and the more he considered it the more clearly he saw it was the only thing to be done. After all, the child was nearly fifteen. She could go to one of the excellent day-schools in town, and London life would be excellent for a year or two from an educational point of view. He felt, too, that he understood her better now, and that it would be possible for him to make her happy, and not be irritated himself by her ways or presence.

Late that evening he sought Evelyn, and the two had a long talk together over his proposed plan, and Evelyn found a weight taken off her mind.

"It's a great relief to me," she said. "I did not know what to do for the best. I dreaded the thought of sending her to school, and yet I could not take her to Kultänn. Are you sure, though, that it will be all right for you?"

Gifford nodded.

"Quite," he said. "I am beginning to understand Nancy at last—perhaps because she is growing older—and I think she would be happy with me. Talk it over with her, Evelyn, and see what she thinks."

Evelyn did as he requested, and the matter was finally arranged that Nancy should make her home with Gifford, and spend part of all her holidays under Lady Duncombe's care, Cecile herself insisting on this last condition.

Three weeks before his marriage, Richard dined with Sir Henry Macintyre, and when the evening was drawing to a close, his host took him aside for a moment.

"There's one bit of advice I want to give you, Cavanagh," he said, putting his arm through Richard's, as they paced up

and down the dimly lit conservatory, "and that is this : don't make the mistake of judging other men by yourself and your own aims, and don't underestimate the strength of your enemy ! You were just a little inclined to do so years back, and take it from me that it's not wise. You can't force a man into your way of thinking, though you may into your way of acting, and, believe me, it does not answer in the long-run. All you've got to do now is to keep your end up and pull your district into shape. I think the change here at home will make things easier for you, and you know as well as I do the necessity for a strong rule—mailed fist in the velvet glove. You understand its uses and its importance. I don't fancy you will find quite so much grit in the cog-wheels in future. That's all I have to say, except to wish you and Kultänn a splendid future."

CHAPTER XXII

"GAD ! I'm about fed up with this place ! Think I shall put in for leave."

Curtis flung himself into a chair and shouted for a drink, while Mellishe, lazily perusing a paper just arrived from home looked up in some amazement ; for Curtis was a slow and serious person, not altogether given to expressing either disgust or pleasure with any vehemence.

"What's up now ? " he inquired. "Got bad news ? "

"News ? No ! Only the usual thing. Devereux had a row with old Jim Crow at Parachinwar, and came gassing to me about it. What do I care for his rows ? He got in 'em ; let him get out again ! "

"Oh, him ! " Mellishe said carelessly. "If it's no one more important it doesn't matter. But there's going to be trouble in a day or two—big trouble. Hope I get in the middle of it ! By Jove ! what a holy mess he's got the place into ! "

"Hasn't he ! The reservoir works are pretty well fit to exhibit as the ruin of an ancient civilization, and the whole district's upside down. Hallo, Barclay ! Just talking about your affairs."

The new-comer was Bobby Kinloch's successor, a dark-eyed,

eager boy of three or four and twenty, desperately keen on his work, and utterly disgusted with his chief. Henderson had known and loved his father, and liked the son. Mellishe, Curtis, and the others voted him a good little chap, and Scott said nothing, but gave him many a hint that proved valuable in the stormy days through which the district was passing.

He came in now, looking very fagged out, but alert and eager as ever, dropped into a chair, and responded with a smile to the greetings he received.

"It wasn't a profitable conversation, then," he said, in answer to Curtis's remark. "I've just been over at Perānan. There's a gorgeous row on there with old Gotra Das."

"Gotra Das always was a kind of Jonah," Mellishe said. "If there's ever any trouble going, he gets it. What's the particular row?"

Barclay lit a cigarette and yawned.

"That old bounder, what's-his-name, the money-lender, has been playing tricks with Gotra Das himself. It seems that he's been playing fast and loose with the Land Alienation Act. Anyway, there's a mortgage on some property that's got no right to be there."

"What's the result, then?"

"Oh, the chief's given him the chuck."

"What?"

Mellishe pulled his lazy limbs together and stared. Curtis got up and echoed the question, and Barclay's dark eyes went from one to the other.

"Kicked him out," he said, "and has appointed Bardar Khan, old Khoda Khan's nephew, in his place."

Curtis banged down his fist on the table.

"He's mad!" he exclaimed; "or if he isn't, he's a damn fool! All Kultānn knows what Khoda Khan is—wily old devil—and t'other chap's only crime is that he's so confoundedly unfortunate! . . . What else has been happening?"

Barclay rose and picked up a satchel of papers that had been reposing on the floor at his feet.

"Nothing else," he said, "except that the chief starts for Ramaragh to-morrow. That means a week. What d'you say, Mellishe?"

Mellishe shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing," he said—"at least, if I did, it doesn't matter. Oh! so he's going into camp, is he? You, too?"

"No; I'm off to see what they're doing about the bridge at Umchingar. There's been a bit of a fuss there, and Mir Ali sent in a complaint about damage to his grazing-land. Well, I must go. I only looked in to see if there were any letters for me. How long's the mail been in?"

"Nearly an hour. Hard luck to get nothing."

Barclay departed towards the District Officer's bungalow through the appalling heat of the early evening, leaving consternation and disgust behind him.

"Just like Devereux, to go into camp five weeks early, when he's just fired a train by kicking old Gotra Das out of his job!" Curtis said angrily. "What possesses the man? If he tried to, he couldn't make more mistakes."

"Mistakes?" Mellishe growled. "Fine kind of mistakes. They'll cause some bloodshed before long, I know. Pity there's no chance of it being his! I'd mistake him!"

"Here's Scott," Curtis said, "and I must be off. I've got my men to post. See you later."

He went off as Scott entered, scowling heavily, and calling for a drink, which he took standing. Mellishe eyed him closely.

"What's wrong, Scotty?" he inquired at length.

Scott set his glass down with a bang, and let loose the vials of his wrath.

"That damned fool Devereux has been going through my stores, and decided that there's been too much spent on 'em!" he exclaimed. "Reduced the orders by a third, and countermanded the beds ordered for the new ward. Then he's dismissed Wadi Das at Parachinwar, and left a single man in charge, and because old Khoda Khan's wife's sister's husband's grandfather, or something of the kind, says it's all right, he's left Jallundar in a rottenly insanitary condition. It's bad enough to give a dog cholera to go within half a mile of it!"

"Who's zaildar there?"

"Heaven knows; I don't! It used to be Ali Das, I believe, in Cavanagh's time. But that's not everything, though it's bad enough. Barclay told me just now that there's an outbreak of rinderpest among the cattle there, and he wanted to segregate 'em. Devereux told him it wasn't a bad enough outbreak."

"Prize idiot!" was Mellishe's comment. "What else?"

"Plenty. As I came up just now he was in the Court-house

hearing a squabble between Mahli Ali and some other old sinner. Apparently Mahli Ali has been buying a pair of Haryana bullocks for ploughing from the other chap, and only gave him one hundred and twenty rupees, when he promised one hundred and thirty rupees. I don't know how he'll settle it. There seemed the makings of a pretty row. Oh! and the storm last week damaged the telegraph-poles ten miles out on the Thāl road, and he's not had 'em repaired yet. Nice, isn't it?"

"Clever thing to do! Does he want a row?" Mellishe remarked, as Scott finished his drink. "That means we are cut off from communication with anywhere. Hullo! what's up?"

A bugle rang out, and he went to the verandah frowning perplexedly. The swift dusk of the Northern autumn had descended over the land, but, despite the half-darkness, there was a visible stir in the town, and Scott, who had followed Mellishe on to the verandah, whistled softly.

"I wonder what's the matter?" he said. "Hullo! Gad! that's what they're up to, is it? Now we're going to see some fun!"

From the darkness to the north came the sound of shots, and from the poorer quarter of the town arose a shouting that made Scott's face suddenly harden.

"By Gad!" he said, under his breath; "this means mischief!"

But he spoke to empty air, for Mellishe had left the clubhouse and was hurrying back to the Lines. The flare-up that he had prophesied had come at last.

Thanks to Devereux's criminal folly in neglecting to have the telegraph communication between Kultänn and Thāl put right, the place was utterly cut off, and also, thanks to him, the discipline of the town was so lax that there were numbers of neighbouring tribesmen in the bazaar on this very night, careless of law and authority, and only intent on once more getting power into their hands. That the attack had been arranged by someone well acquainted with Devereux's lax method of government was only too plain, and dearly was Kultänn designed to pay for it.

Mellishe went down to the Lines at a run, and just as he reached them glanced in the direction of the hills, and there, a tiny red flame against the darkness, burned a signal-fire. Far away to the east and west he could see others, and

he knew it meant a preconcerted attack right along this part of the Frontier. The Colonel, with grimly set face, rode out of the Lines, and in the main road met the author of all the trouble, Percy Devereux.

He reined up, for the other shouted to him.

"What is it?" he said curtly.

Devereux leant forward in his saddle, his eyes searching the other's face.

"What's the matter?" he asked nervously. "What's going to happen?"

Under his grizzled moustache Henderson's lips curled.

"Bloodshed is going to happen," he retorted. "I imagine it's a general rising along this part of the Frontier. You had better see about quieting the bazaar and getting the non-combatants into some place of safety."

Devereux drew back.

"Yes. I suppose so. What can I——"

Henderson interrupted him.

"Excuse me, I've no time to waste," he said shortly, and cantered up the road, leaving Devereux gazing after him, utterly at a loss now that a crisis had arisen that called for prompt action and decisive measures.

The bazaar was in a tumult, and the sight of the fires blazing at different points along the foot-hills was anything but reassuring. There was no doubt that this attack was to be no mere skirmish, but a general uprising, and Henderson rode from point to point, giving curt orders and cursing Devereux in his soul by all his gods.

Mellishe cantered up to him preparatory to setting forth with his Pathans.

"Is there no way of getting word to Thāl for reinforcements?" he asked, searching the darkness with angry eyes; and Henderson shook his head.

"No. We must manage as we are. It's certain death to send one man alone, and I can't spare more. Take your men well round to the west of the ford. Hullo! What do you want?"

He pulled his horse round, in answer to a touch on the knee, and saw Barclay standing there in the dusk, his face glimmering white through the half-light, his eyes on fire.

"I want to go to Thāl," he said. Mellishe had ridden away, and the Colonel had to follow. Barclay caught his stirrup. "Let me, sir! It's the fault of my department

that we're in this mess. I was sure it wasn't the storm that broke those confounded wires. It was native work. Let me go, Colonel."

Henderson frowned down at the slight figure that quivered with eagerness.

"Do you know what you're asking?" he said roughly.

Barclay nodded.

"Yes. It doesn't matter. It's the lives of everyone here. Let me go!"

Henderson scribbled an order on a card and gave it him.

"Give that to Kelley, and take the lower ford. It's more likely to be unwatched. Ask my syce to give you Prince Rupert. He'll get you there if any animal ever foaled will! Good luck to you, boy!"

Barclay did not wait for anything, but went off at the double, and with a muttered, "God forgive me!" Henderson galloped up to the fort.

Mellishe's prophecy of big trouble was only too correct, and shortly after midnight came a concerted attack on the town and the neighbouring villages.

The Ressaldar, with a troop of his Sikhs, whirled down to the lower town, and found a veritable shambles, for the men who had ostensibly come in to trade for the past four or five days had risen at the signal of the attack, and were killing right and left, hoping to force their way to the gates, and thus catch the Government troops in a trap.

In the narrow alleys of the poor quarter cavalry was useless, and the Ressaldar took matters into his own hands and despatched a trooper at a hand-gallop for the Goorkhas, who arrived in time to assist with joyful squeals in the carnage going on along the river-bank. The Ressaldar drew his men off in retreat to the fort, and was promptly ordered out to block the road to Perānan, whence a large body of the enemy was desirous of making its way; and so the night wore on, till, at the dawn, the attack ceased, and the enemy drew off to the shelter of the foot-hills, leaving the Colonel to view the harm that had been wrought, and rage at his own impotence.

"We could smash them once and for all," he stormed. "I'd give heaven and earth for enough cavalry to follow 'em! We could grind 'em into powder, cut 'em to atoms, and here I am, forced to sit still and wait till they're rested enough to come on and kill more of my men, and all because of that damned idiot of a civilian."

Here the Colonel's language grew unrepeatable with mingled grief and rage, and Mellishe stood by silently, letting the storm break over his devoted head, echoing in his own mind every word his superior officer was saying. The hospital had been attacked, and was little more than a heap of ruins, and when Colonel Henderson went there an hour later, he found Scott, covered with dust, and blood, and grime, with a roughly tied bandage round his head, trying to do ten men's work, with only one Sikh trooper to help him.

He finished the job he was engaged upon, fastened the bandage, and straightened himself, with a smothered ejaculation of pain, and the Colonel's hard face grew harder as he looked at his wounded men.

"You're hurt, Scott," he said sharply. "Hold up, man!"

Scott grasped his arm for a moment, to steady himself.

"I'm all right. Only a graze. Lost a good deal of blood, and that and the heat made me feel queer a moment."

He passed on, and the Colonel followed, sick at heart at the needless suffering one man's ignorance had caused, and the long day wore away in sights and sounds that would haunt many a man to his death, for the wounded lay panting in any place of shelter that could be found, tortured by fever and pain and the pitiless, blazing sunshine; suffering agonies of thirst, despite the utmost Scott and his assistant could do, gasping their lives away in the cruel heat, and still the reinforcements from Thāl did not come, and the Colonel blamed himself for sending young Barclay to his death.

Towards nightfall the enemy advanced, and Henderson gathered his men for the attack, determined to give them no chance to commence operations, for everyone knows that an Afghan attacked is much less formidable than an Afghan attacking, and Henderson knew the value of keeping his men busy.

Just after seven, however, above the din and noise rose other sounds from the direction of Thāl, and Henderson knew that help had arrived. After that the fight was of short duration, and in twenty-four hours the Frontier was quiet again, and several tribes were desirous of settling scores with a certain wealthy and hoary-headed Pathan gentleman, who had promised them easy victory and abundance of plunder—not to mention the head of the smiling Englishman whom they universally despised.

When the report of the trouble came to headquarters, Sir

John Hawkins descended on the district in might, and Mr. Devereux heard many things that surprised him. Afterwards he was not surprised any more, when he was given another district somewhere in Bengal, where his peculiar talents could exercise themselves in a comparatively harmless manner.

Ramshar Khan heard the astounding news of his successor's identity, and humbly asked Scott if it were true; and Scott answered truthfully enough that he did not know anything about the matter. He marvelled thereat, nevertheless, for even yet he could not get accustomed to the uncanny knowledge of the future that the Eastern people possess, and the possibility of Cavanagh's recall seemed too good to be true.

One morning, however, the news was ratified, and before half an hour had passed the bazaar was ringing with it, and the townspeople greeted one another with the word that Cavanagh Sahib was coming back to his people.

"None too soon, either!" Mellishe remarked late one night, when, work being over, the European population of Kultänn stretched itself in long chairs, and drank pegs thirstily. "If he'd been back two months ago, we shouldn't have had this mess!"

"And if we hadn't had this mess we shouldn't have him come back at all!" Curtis retorted. "Don't you grumble at the goods the gods send, my son! I'm glad enough to have Cavanagh back at any price."

"Is it true that he's married?" Clifford inquired. "If so, what on earth's he going to do with his wife?"

"Heaven knows! Simla, perhaps. Yes, that's a tragedy. I thought better of Cavanagh than that!"

"No good, Mellishe! They all go the same way sooner or later. Just the best men, and the men you'd swear were old enough to know better. They meet some pretty schoolgirl, and it's all up! I'm not a bit surprised at Cavanagh—I've seen it happen before."

"She's Border, though, isn't she?" inquired Taylor, a recent comer, and a distinct acquisition to the mess. "Perhaps she'll be better than you think."

"Oh yes, she's Border. Daughter of old Chetwynde, of the Guides, you know. But what's the good of counting on that? Probably she'll have high-falutin' notions, and want to keep Cavanagh from running into danger."

"She won't understand—that'll be the devil of it!" Curtis

said, shaking his head regretfully. "She'll be full of plans beforehand—oh yes—and say she doesn't want to come between him and his work, and she's so proud of his career, and all that ; but she won't understand, all the same. Women don't really care for anything except as a background to some particular man, and she won't be any exception. Oh Lord, why, why, why !"

There was a moment's pause, and Scott, who had been listening in silence, suddenly got to his feet and surveyed his companion.

"It's all very interesting and very true what you've been saying," he said, and at the sound of his voice they all turned to listen ; "but, as I've met Miss Chetwynde, perhaps you'll allow me to add my opinion to yours."

"Hear, hear !"

"Certainly ! - Get on, old chap !"

"Mean to say you've fallen a victim to the fair she-woman ?"

Scott ignored the jibes, and leant back against the table.

"I hated the idea of Cavanagh marrying as much as any of you did," he said. "This isn't the place for married men. It's not fit to bring a poor little wretch of a woman up here and expect her to be happy. But just now and then there does happen to be a woman who *can* live here and be happy . . . more . . . she can't be happy anywhere else. Miss Chetwynde happens to be that woman. She's Border right through . . . and she understands the life she's coming to, and values the work for itself, apart from Cavanagh altogether. She's a woman, too, not a girl, and I think Cavanagh's done the best thing, in falling in love with her, that he ever did in his life. That's my opinion of the matter, and I hope it will be yours when you meet Miss Chetwynde. Now I must be off, so I'll say good-night."

He picked up his glass, finished his whisky, and, nodding to the others, went out of the room, and if he had thrown a bomb in their midst, he could not have left greater amazement behind him, for his audience knew to a man his aversion to women.

Mellishe was the first to speak. "So that's what she's done to Scotty !" he said. "By Jove ! it strikes me Mrs. Richard Cavanagh must be rather an unusual sort of person. I feel anxious to make her acquaintance."

"Well, you won't have long to wait, if Cavanagh comes

into residence on the 30th. By Gad ! what work he's got in front of him ! "

" Just the thing that'll please him most. Do you know it's after twelve ? I'm off to my virtuous couch. Good-night all ! "

Mellishe's going broke up the gathering, and one by one the men drifted off to their quarters, and when the last of them had gone a figure crept from its hiding-place under one of the windows and stole away, taking advantage of every patch of shadow, and keeping a wary lookout, as if fearing detection.

Four weeks later the populace of Kultänn turned out *en masse* to welcome Cavanagh Sahib back to his own, and a detachment of Pathans, with the Colonel at their head, rode out five miles to meet the tonga, which should arrive about four o'clock.

Only the Ressaldar was absent from the general rejoicing in town and club, and from the little company of men riding along the tonga-road ; for he had started ahead an hour before, and now horse and rider waited motionless beside the ruined shrine, at the very spot where they had parted from the man for whom they now waited.

The rains were late, and though in the north the first herald of the coming winter was seen in flecks of greyish cloud, yet the day was hot and fine, and the sun glinted on the silver trappings of the horse, and cast a majestic shadow on the hot earth.

The afternoon wore on ; the shadow cast by the shrine grew longer ; and still the superb figure sat motionless on the big stallion, gazing along the dusty road to a turn two miles away, neither moving nor speaking, only waiting with the limitless patience of the East, for the fulfilment of his heart's desire.

At last, at the very turn itself, far away on the empty road, rose a tiny cloud of dust, and at the sight the watchers' keen eyes gleamed, and something in the thrill of his nerves communicated the good news to the magnificent horse he sat, for, with a sudden movement, the stallion tossed his head and pawed the ground, whickering softly in a strange excitement.

The cloud of dust grew bigger, and presently in its midst a dark speck became visible, and the horse grew more restless, feeling the agitation of his rider.

Nearer and nearer drew the dust, larger grew the object

that caused it, till a tonga was visible, with mounted men riding on either side, as though they gave the traveller the royal escort, and when the tonga was less than a hundred yards away, the Ressaldar rode out from his vantage-point, and over his fine old face there flashed a look that those who saw it never forgot, for the little group came to a standstill, and a man riding a superb black mare, detaching himself from it, rode forward and held out his hand.

The old Sikh gripped it, and for a moment neither he nor Cavanagh spoke, but faced each other with locked hands and eyes that read each other's soul; then over Cavanagh's face flashed the old smile, and he spoke.

"Greeting, Ressaldar Sahib. Is all well?"

And, though the tears sparkled in the keen hawk-eyes, the old man lifted his proud head and flashed back an answering smile:

"Greeting, Cavanagh Sahib. Ay, all is well!"

Such was their meeting, and then Richard turned his head, and Evelyn, who had been watching, rode forward and received the old man with a smile that shone through a mist at his broken words of welcome; for to him she was doubly dear, both as the child he had taught and watched with such tender pride and as the wife of the man he loved as a son.

They swung round the last corner, horses galloping, dust flying, and then pulled to a second halt, for a troop of cavalry wheeled across the road and came to a standstill not ten yards away.

For a moment the dreamlike sense of unreality deepened, and Evelyn bit her lips, to stifle the exclamation that rose to them, for they were the men of her father's regiment—the men she had grown up amongst, tall, handsome, fierce-eyed . . . her father's men . . . and it seemed as though she were a child again, and that erect figure at their head her father's form.

"Colonel Henderson!"

"Cavanagh!"

Richard's hand was caught in a grip like a vice, and Henderson's voice, gruffer, even, than usual, sounded in his ears.

"Welcome back, Cavanagh. We need you badly!"

Richard wrung his hand and met his eyes steadily.

"I'm glad!" he said. "May I introduce you to my wife? Evelyn . . . this is Colonel Henderson."

Evelyn leant forward and held out her hand, and as her

eyes met his, all Henderson's doubts for the future fled, and, as much to his own amazement as to anyone else's, instead of shaking it, he lifted it to his lips.

"For your own as well as your father's sake," he said gallantly, "I welcome you home!"

Evelyn's smile was rather uncertain for a minute, and her eyes shone suspiciously as she spoke.

"Thank you," she said simply. "And for his sake as well as my own I am doubly glad to come."

Mellishe was introduced, and then the cavalcade moved forward once more at a swift trot down the last long slope of road, splashed through the ford, climbed the corresponding hill, and entered the town.

The entire population was there to welcome him, and Richard rode in amidst shouts and cries, his face inscrutable, only his eyes betraying the emotion that surged in his heart. They had not forgotten him; they wanted him still, and his work was given back. Small wonder that even his composure was shaken a little at the welcome he received.

Evelyn, too, came in for her share; Chetwynde Sahib was not forgotten, and it was known to everyone that she was his daughter, this beautiful gracious lady, who was their Cavanagh Sahib's wife. She had lost the sense of dreamlike unreality now, and was wildly, rapturously happy. It was for Richard, her husband, that the people shouted and danced, and her eyes shone as they rested on him. Her husband, this strong, quiet man, with set face and gleaming eyes, who rode unmoved through the excited people.

She saw an old man suddenly totter forward, upheld by a stalwart Pathan, and Richard rein in his horse and bend down to receive the feeble muttered greeting, and at the halt the people surged closer, struggling, fighting, even, to speak with him, to touch his boot or his hand.

"Greeting, Sahib—greeting!"

The oily voice struck a chord of memory, and Richard straightened himself and turned sharply to his right, and the next thing happened so quickly that Evelyn could hardly grasp its import.

There was a sudden forward pressure of the people, a cry ringing out above the din of welcome.

"Greeting from Kabul, Cavanagh Sahib!" The flash of a knife, and a yell that shook the air, as Richard swayed in the saddle with the force of the blow.

The crowd turned back on itself, recoiling in horror from the deed, and Evelyn felt herself suddenly gripped by a strong arm.

"It's all right. Don't be frightened. He's not hurt."

At the sound of the voice she turned and met the eyes of a big fair man she did not know.

"I am not frightened. Get the man!" she said; but the order was needless, for a shriek rang out from amidst the surging mass of people about Cavanagh's horse, and then another, and from the crowd rose a howl of murderous rage.

Even Richard was powerless to rescue his would-be assassin, and he wheeled his horse clear of the group that fought and struggled above some prostrate foe, and spoke to Evelyn.

"Go on with Major Curtis," he said. "I will follow when I've settled this business. Curtis, will you be kind enough to take my wife home?"

Then it was that Curtis knew Evelyn was truly her father's daughter, for she nodded and smiled in Richard's eyes, though his lips were white.

"Very well. Don't worry about me. Come, Major Curtis!"

Evelyn was sitting very erect in her saddle, her eyes bright, her lips set, and as Curtis wheeled his horse by the side of her, she spoke again.

"Do you know who it was, Major Curtis?" she asked.

"I don't," Curtis answered, savagely biting his moustache; "and I doubt now if I ever shall. He'll be somewhat unrecognizable by the time Cavanagh gets the crowd off him."

"He was a big fat man," she said, her grip on the reins tightening involuntarily. "I saw him the moment before, pushing to get near my husband. Could it have been the man about whom he has spoken to me? Abdul Gharfur was the name."

Curtis uttered an exclamation.

"By Gad! I believe you're right!" he exclaimed.

"Damned old scoundrel! I beg your pardon!"

Evelyn took no notice of the apology, but looked him steadily in the face for a moment.

"You are sure he did not get away?" she said.

Curtis nodded.

"Quite!" he said emphatically. "The crowd got him under. Here we are, Mrs. Cavanagh. Hi! khitmutgar!"

Ramshar Khan came forward, salaaming humbly, and Curtis

gave him a brief order, while Evelyn went forward into the house.

She remembered it with extraordinary distinctness, for in her childhood she had often been brought here by her father or mother to visit the District Officer; but to-day she looked upon it with very different eyes, for now it was her home and the home of the man she loved more than life itself.

In the brief time that elapsed between their arrival and Cavanagh's Evelyn talked to Curtis with a serenity that amazed but did not deceive him, and he began, as Scott and Colonel Henderson had done before him, to change his opinion, and unwillingly admit to himself that perhaps here was the one woman in the world for Kultänn.

Her only betrayal of anxiety was when Richard entered the room, and then she spoke quickly.

"Is it all right, Richard?"

He came swiftly across to her and took the hand outstretched to him, holding it for a minute in his.

"Quite!" he said. "It was whom I thought."

"He is dead?"

"Yes."

Curtis echoed her exclamation of relief.

"Now you'll have peace at Kultänn, I hope," he said; "and you need it. You've got the work of ten men in front of you, Cavanagh. You never saw such a state as the district is in—battle, murder, and sudden death, let alone wholesale bribery and corruption!"

Richard glanced at Evelyn and smiled.

"It doesn't sound ideal!" he said. "But it's what I came back for. Evelyn, we've our work cut out for us!"

Curtis lifted his thick, fair eyebrows as he rose to go.

"We?" he echoed. "Rough luck on you, Mrs. Cavanagh, to hear such a list of evils directly you come out!"

"I knew what I was coming to!" she answered cheerfully.

"The more work the better. It's what we both enjoy. Thank you very much for riding up with me, Major Curtis. I expect you will see my husband after dinner. He's sure to be at the club."

When Richard re-entered the room after seeing him off, Evelyn came to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"You're not hurt?" she said. "Oh, my darling! you're not hurt?"

He met her eyes steadily, and then drew her close to him.

"No, dear ; not in the least. It was a bad homecoming, I'm afraid, but good in the sense that I'm rid of my last enemy here in Kultänn. It was Abdul Gharfur. He took advantage of my pulling up to speak to old Gurga Das. I couldn't save him. The mob pretty well tore him to pieces. I must go and change, dear. I'm disgustingly hot and dirty. I expect some of the men may be up presently. You won't mind ? "

Evelyn laughed softly as she followed him out of the room.

"Mind ? You dear old stupid ! I shall like it. Yes. Go and change, and I'll order tea, for I'm horribly thirsty."

He kissed her and went to his room, and Evelyn ordered tea, and then, crossing the room, walked out on to the verandah. The cold weather was just beginning, and as she stood there she could see that the scrubby trees in the compound were fast shedding their leaves, and that the bushes were dry and withered with the terrible heat just passed. Before her the road ran down to the Lines, and she could see the club was barely five minutes' walk away, its low, slanting roof sheltered by a clump of stunted pine-trees, its dusty compound surrounded by thick bushes and a low mud-wall. To the left, down the slope to the river, lay the squalid jumble of huts forming the native town, and beyond the narrow belt of cultivated land along the banks of the Kultanar the country stretched, desolate and stony, to low hills on the horizon.

She surveyed the scene with grave eyes, seeing the ruins of the hospital, and the beginnings of the new building away beyond the ford, noticing signs of the recent fighting in the many battered-down walls and half-ruined houses ; and for a moment or two she felt nothing but furious indignation against the man who had worked all this harm ; then, with a little gesture, as though she put all evil from her mind, she traversed the length of the verandah, and turned the corner of the house.

Not a mile away the foot-hills rose from the plain, their lower slopes thickly wooded with fir and pine forests, their great rounded summits jumbled together as though some giant hand had carelessly flung them down to fall how they would, here and there a tiny dot marking a village or rude fort ; and remote from all human knowledge, dazzling in their eternal snows, the vast white rampart of the Hills towered against the sky.

It was there on the verandah Richard found her, ten minutes later, forgetful of the tea she had ordered, forgetful of everything save the Hills she loved ; and for a moment he was loath to disturb her thoughts, then he remembered the long ride, the fatigue she must be feeling, the work that lay before him that evening, and he went up to her and spoke.

" Evelyn ! "

She turned hastily, starting at the sound, then, seeing who it was had spoken, smiled and laid her hand on his arm.

" I'm so sorry. Were you waiting for me ? I came out here just to see the Hills as I remembered them. "

He nodded as they re-entered the drawing-room together.

" Yes. I thought so. I was sorry to disturb you, but you ought to have some tea and a rest after your ride, and I have to start work to-night—at least, I want to. "

She took a seat by the tea-table and smiled at him.

" Of course ! The hospital first, I suppose ? I hope I shall be able to help you a little. There is so much wants doing. "

Their talk drifted off to the work to be done, and when tea was ended, Evelyn went with him into his office, and met Barclay, who greeted his new chief with eager, apprehensive eyes, that quietened as they met Cavanagh's, for he had rather dreaded the meeting, in case he should not feel that intense confidence in him that everyone else had experienced.

Late that night Evelyn went again on to the verandah. The clouds gathering for the winter had temporarily dispersed, and the moon was at the full, clear, radiant, in the cold blue of the northern sky. Behind the bungalow the Hills rose, silent and majestic, the snows glittering in the moonlight ; while to the south the town lay in darkness, save where squares of light showed through the chinks of the club windows.

She stood motionless in the darkness, her thoughts flown for the moment towards Gifford and Nancy ; then suddenly a smile flashed into her eyes, for from the club came the rousing sound of a chorus, shouted and yelled by an enthusiastic crowd of men, " For he's a jolly good fellow, " etc., followed by prolonged cheers.

It was Richard they were cheering—Richard, her husband ; and the proud, tender light deepened in her eyes, and the burden of the years that were past fell from her shoulders, and she looked forward gladly, courageously, to the life that lay ahead. He was hers—hers wholly, utterly, and so she

was happy, fearing and doubting nothing if he were by her side ; and even as she stood musing, footsteps sounded up the road, and a quick, decisive voice said :

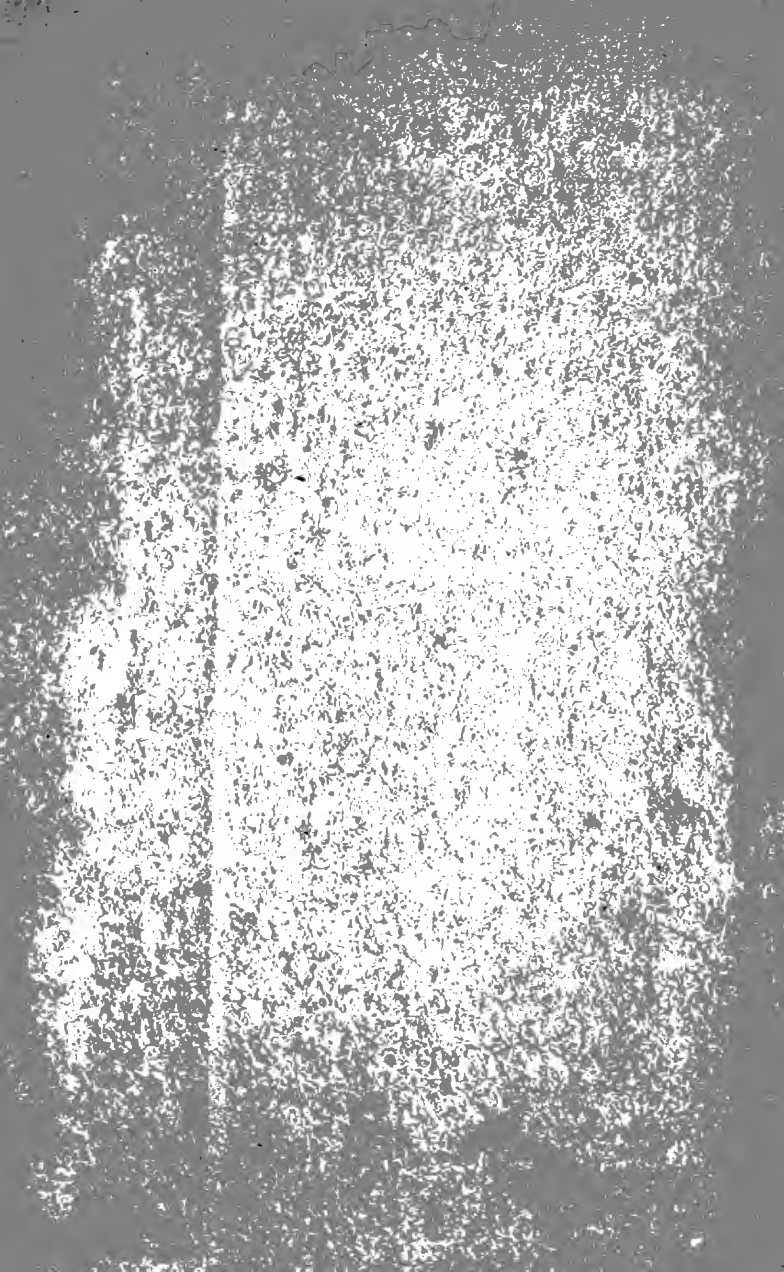
“ Good-night all ! Good-night, Scott ! ” and a moment later Richard himself entered the courtyard, and, with outstretched hands, she turned to meet him, her eyes shining, her lips parted.

“ Ah ! you have come back, my husband,” she said. “ I waited for you just to-night.”

His face lit up, his eyes grew hot and eager, and he caught her hands in his.

“ Yes, I have come back,” he said—“ back to you, Evelyn. . . . Evelyn . . . ah, how I love you ! ”

THE END



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